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CHATTO AND WINDUS, PICCADILLY, W.

“MY LOVE!”



“MY LOVE!”

BY

E. LYNN LINTON

AUTHOR OF “PATRICIA KEMBALL,” “THE ATONEMENT OF LEAM DUNDAS,”
“UNDER WHICH LORD?” “THE REBEL OF THE FAMILY,” ETC.



IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.

London

CHATTO AND WINDUS, PICCADILLY

1881

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“MY LOVE!”

CHAPTER I.

ON THE BRINK.

HERE!—of all places in the world, this! The widow started at the sound of Colonel Money-penny's voice as if he had been a spirit called from out the infinite by the spell of her desire. She looked up with a frightened and bewildered face. The guard which she usually maintained with so much care was suddenly broken down, and she was as confused and overcome as any other woman might have been. Had she been a mere school-girl met out of bounds, or caught in the act of stealing sacred apples, she could not have been more abashed for the moment than now, when Colonel Money-penny woke her from her dreaming wrath and took her hand to lead her to his house for shelter.

That shelter was typical. She felt the secret correspondence of her unspoken thoughts with this translated action, and shivered as if the snow-flakes, falling fast, had touched her heart as well as her pallid face.

“You are quite pale! The weather is too much for you. You ought not to be out in such a storm,” said Colonel Moneyppenny with all his best courtesy—his finest mingling of the gentleman’s dignity with the lover’s tenderness. “Let us make haste up the avenue,” he continued. “We shall soon reach the house.”

“Thank you,” said Augusta mechanically.

As mechanically she let him take her hand on his arm, and hold it for a moment closely clasped, as they walked rapidly between the leafless chestnuts which swayed and creaked in the wind and caught the snow as it fell in their branches like a net. The wind beat in their faces, and the large densely-frozen flakes stung her soft flesh as they were driven with almost the force of hail. She knew how strange it must seem to the Colonel that she should be out on such a day; stranger still that she should have been met just at *his* gate. But it was pleasant to feel that she had this shelter before her—that she might, if she would, escape once and for ever from all the present storms

of her life—both from this in the midst of which she walked and from that other yet more difficult to bear at home.

She walked up the avenue with a strange sense of possible drifting out of present pain into temporary safety and future danger. She felt like a person slipping down a smooth and pleasant decline instead of continuing on a rugged, toilsome ascent. The motion was soothing and she shut her eyes to the rest. The storm raged without and her mother's house was even more inhospitable than the elements; she was on the Colonel's arm, making for the shelter of his home; and she knew that it rested only with her to hold that shelter as her own for ever if she would.

Nothing was said between them as they went up the avenue. Like a wise man who knows how to take care of himself, the Colonel objected to opening his mouth in such weather as this. He suffered not infrequently from neuralgia; and he and the dentist at Lingston knew a few secrets which the world at large did not even suspect. But when they came to the house, he led her in with the same fine mingling of courtesy and tenderness as before; checked only by the presence of his man from showing perhaps too openly what pleasure her

crossing his threshold thus gave him. He did really love her, as much as a man naturally selfish and arbitrary, a little mean and very irritable, can love any one outside himself; and his hesitation, both before her marriage and now when she was again free, was but the ordinary hesitation of a man who has stiffened in his widower's groove, and who has more things to think of than one before he finally resolves to break the spell and renew his past in a second marriage.

He looked on this odd meeting at his own gates as a kind of sign—a correspondence—what some would call “a leading;” and he was excited and elated. That fellow whose presumption had so disturbed him had suddenly slipped like a snake out of his path, and he was master of the situation. There was no one else in Highwood or any other place who, so far as he knew, disputed with him the ground which he had marked out for his own. Sandro Kemp off the field, he had the course to himself. As for Mrs. Morshead's ferocious constancy to the dead, that was a simple absurdity—a brutum fulmen which hurt no one. If Augusta loved him he had almost resolved that he would marry her. And he had money enough to secure her future, though she

would not perhaps be quite so well off as if she inherited from her mother. The old woman lived on about half her income, if so much, and invested the other. He lived up to the last farthing of his. There was too, this little son of his dead rival to be thought of; and perhaps others whose claims would be greater and their share larger. He would not make his heir of the Professor's son, if he had his own to endow; but he could give the lad a good education and see him through the first sterile years of his profession. Pecuniarily it would not be so good for Augusta to marry him and be disinherited by her mother, as to remain where she was, waiting for that weary wearing of the dead woman's shoes. Still it would not be poverty; and she would make him happy.

Even at this moment of a lover's exaltation and a lover's keen appraisement of the value of the thing he wants, Colonel Money Penny did not say to himself that he would make Augusta happy. That came as of course—as the corollary, the reflection, the inevitable sequence to his own state of content. Or rather it did not enter into his calculations at all, one way or the other. When we hire a servant or buy a horse we do not think of the servant's happiness under our mastership, of the horse's pleasure

under our guidance. If we give sufficient wages to the one, good food to the other, we are quit of all obligation; but our own advantage remains, as the rope on which the whole value of the transaction depends. The Colonel was not the only man in England who, courting a woman with delicate devotion while she holds herself mistress of the situation, free to grant and able to withhold, keeps her as a caged creature, fairly caught and trapped, when once she has come down from her height to his lure; and in keeping her thus forgets to ask if she likes her fate—and would not stop for the answer if she did.

The drawing-room at Bellevue was, as is so often the case in the houses of unmarried men, reserved for state social occasions when there were dinner-parties on hand, or one of those pleasant little dances with supper to follow, for which the Colonel was famous. He himself lived in the dining-room and library, both of which were comfortable enough; and now, as he and Augusta came in from the wind and the snow outside, the bright blazing fire and not ungraceful litter of occupancy were as a welcome to Home. Without doubt the library was essentially masculine in its circumstances, and wanted the graceful touch of a woman's hand,

the fringe of pretty nothings which she always adds. But it was full of the substantial luxury which a man finds pleasanter to his senses than those spots of colour and sparkle which are known by the general term of ornaments. And if the books were not what is called drawing-room books, they were handsome and solid and gave one the impression of stores of latent learning in the Colonel's mind, and a kind of colossal literary digestion. It was all very warm and strong and ample; and the Colonel himself seemed to gain in breadth from the comfortable stability of his surroundings.

By this time Augusta had recovered herself. The question had formed itself clearly in her mind:—Should she? or:—Should she not? He had enough to make her future safe if not brilliant—enough for her son, who must be the only heir. And she could if she would. The house was full of capabilities if once she put her hand to it; her social position as his wife would be unexceptionable; she might even in time win her mother over to forgiveness; and this fire was so comforting! It was with a sense of real *bien-être* that she sank down in the easy chair which he pulled up for her close to the fender. It was not his own special chair. That was sacred even against Augusta

Latrobe; for Colonel Money Penny was a man who understood the whole theory of self-respect and practised the whole art of self-indulgence. In her present state of moral destitution, the mere physical enjoyment of this rest and fire, the material sufficiency of the Colonel's home, had a curiously soothing effect on her. As she sank back in the long low curved chair, and put up her pretty feet on the fender—had she given herself time to think she would have been ashamed of the extent to which these purely physical pleasures touched her.

The Colonel rang the bell for cake and wine. Unmarried men always give their lady visitors wine. Where a woman would show her baby the man brings out his port and sherry. Augusta laughed a little and blushed a little more, as she said: "No; she did not want any wine. She never took it before dinner, and very little even then."

"But," insisted the Colonel; "you must, indeed, Mrs. Latrobe! The first time you have been to my house—like this—you must have a glass of wine for good luck!"

He could not say that it was the first time she had been to his house at all; for he gave parties, as has been said, like any other decent citizen; but "like this" meant her coming here

alone—coming out of the storm and inclemency of the day—out of the wretchedness and humiliation of her home—coming in now as the favoured guest to be made the future mistress should his humour finally decide that way.

“I shall be glad to do anything for good luck!” said Augusta rashly, with a little laugh to hide the bitter spring-head of her words.

The Colonel looked at her with an odd expression in his face. She was quick-witted, but she could not quite read that look.

“Do you want good luck in your life?” he asked slowly.

“Oh, no! not much! Not more than one always wants something which one has not got!” she answered lightly. “It is only a foolish way we all have of making ourselves out ill-treated by fortune!”

She thought that, if anything had to come to her from this side, it must not be coloured with compassion. If she herself knew that she was simply selling herself for peace, the Colonel must never believe but that she gave herself grandly, to bless and be blessed.

At this moment the servant brought in the wine, and with his own hand the Colonel poured out a glassful and gave it to Augusta. It was that soft, silky, insidious, old brown

sherry, which, in defiance of gout, some people still drink. All the fire of the alcohol which had once inflamed it had burnt itself out by time, leaving only strength and disguising the presence of what it left. Soft as cream and strong as brandy, it completed the sense of bien-être which the pretty widow felt; and, after she had drunk half her glassful, she said with a smile :

“What excellent wine ! I am no great judge of sherry, but this seems to me superb.”

“I am glad you like it,” said the Colonel with supreme satisfaction. “And—pardon me—you are a good judge ! This wine is indeed excellent. It is no hyperbole to call it superb. Ah !” he added, as he held up his glass between him and the light, and lovingly noted its merits of body, bouquet and colour ; “this is not to be had in the market now for love or money !—Unique !—quite unique ! And you like it ! I am so glad !”

He almost laughed as he said this ; for naturally a man does not like to throw his wine away on an unappreciative palate ; and women are so stupid as to the value of brands and bins !

“Let me fill up your glass,” he then said, advancing towards his guest, decanter in hand.

She drew her glass away, covering it with her pretty black-gloved fingers, and laughing in her nice bright way as she looked up into his eyes.

“No! no!” she said. “I am so little used to wine at this time of the day; and this is so strong. I should be afraid.”

How friendly they were getting! To see them there in this familiar, laughing, half-playful kind of domesticity, no one would have thought that for years the Colonel had cherished against Augusta Latrobe a chronic resentment which only so lately had taken so acute a form—a form which had done her so much irreparable mischief at home and had dealt the man, whom in her heart she loved, a blow that she knew would be to him like death.

“Well, finish that. It will do you good after your cold walk,” said the Colonel; and Augusta obeyed.

“Yes, it is very good,” she said, drinking it frankly; not with the timid little sips of a woman half afraid of what she is about, or as if she expected to find a spider or a newt at the bottom of the glass. The fair widow had just her right share of healthy, natural sensualism—not a line in excess—just her right and fitting share.

How warm and pleasant it was! The two sat over the fire in an easy, sociable, confidential way that had its charms and warmed their souls as the soft brown sherry warmed their blood. The snow was falling fast, and The Laurels looked so far off! This interior was so pleasant, and it composed so naturally!

"How delightful it would be to have you always here!" said Colonel Money Penny abruptly.

She laughed in her light easy way.

"I am not so sure of that," she said with a little mocking accent—patently artificial; but the colour deepened under her bonnet.

"I am," said the Colonel. "My life is so lonely!" he added pathetically.

She moved her chair a few inches from the fire, and took a newspaper from the table as a screen for her face.

"Better lonely than uncongenial," she said. "The fire catches one's face so dreadfully after a walk in the cold wind!" she added, as if apologizing for the ruddy glow that had come into hers, and for the improvised screen made out of the newspaper.

"It is a melancholy look-out to live and die alone," began the Colonel again.

This little break had somewhat baffled him;

but he had tenacity and could always begin where he left off.

"One gets used to it," said Augusta, fluttering through the leaves of her paper. "After a time one gets used to everything," was her philosophic addendum.

"Not to happiness—at least not in the sense of satiety," blundered the Colonel.

"Is there any real happiness in the world?" asked Augusta lightly.

"*You* need not ask this," he replied. "Capable of giving so much as you are, you must be capable of receiving in the same proportion."

He brought his chair a couple of inches nearer to hers, and looked into her face with a certain agitation, a certain tenderness in his eyes which betokened danger.

The incline was very smooth and she was slipping down it pleasantly. After all, the Colonel was really not a bad man. He was irritable and arbitrary, jealous and selfish, but he was honourable and a gentleman; and every woman thinks that if an unmarried man, who is now cross-cornered and disagreeable, were but married to her, he would be all right, and everything would go on velvet. She could manage him if she were his wife. And the

Colonel could not be harsher to her boy, Augusta went on thinking, than was her own mother. Probably he would be far less harsh and, by the sympathy of sex, would take an interest in him and help to make him the honourable gentleman of her ambition.

Yes; the incline was pleasant; and surely that was a firm green sward at the bottom? It was not a treacherous bit of swamp covered over with a lying growth of superficial herbage?

She raised her pretty eyes to his with a soft and yielding look.

"A woman's best happiness," she said gently, "is in that which she gives. What she gives she receives back twenty-fold."

"Ah, how true! How beautiful!" he said, with the deep-drawn breath of a man violently moved.

He rose from his seat and went over to her; but just as he took her hand in both of his and bent his head to speak, the man-servant came into the room to tell him that he was wanted, if he would please to come; the constable was in the Justice-room, and had come to speak to him now at once.

It was the most annoying, the most mistimed interruption that could be imagined; and the

Colonel had only just time to let Augusta's hand fall on her lap, while he made believe to take a book from the table. How much the man saw, and how much he suspected, remained his own secret. His manner showed nothing, and the Colonel was in a sense his prisoner and the constable's—waiting for him in the Justice-room.

He made a stately kind of bow to Augusta and muttered a few formal words of apology for his absence; then left the room with his man whom, if it had been policy and good manners, he could have kicked with hearty goodwill.

Augusta on her side, drew a deep breath when he had gone. She raised herself from her lounging position in the easy-chair, and walked to the window, looking out on the fast-falling snow, which however fell more quietly than before. The wind had fallen and the more active energy of the storm had passed.

She still held the paper in her hand. Partly to relieve the awkward suspense of the moment with its sense of check and discovery in one, partly to divert her thoughts from the discomfort of the home that she had and the doubtful security of the home that she might have if she would, she looked through the items

of news, scarcely knowing what she saw. Suddenly a name caught her eye. Her flushed face paled to the whiteness of that snowdrift against the leafless rose-trees, as she read a short abstract of the will of Henry Kemp, given as a quotation from the paper which does this special business. The personalty was sworn under sixty thousand pounds; and with the exception of a few insignificant legacies, the whole was left to his brother Sandro, the sole executor and residuary legatee. The time of poverty then had passed for him, and he was now rich like his brothers, as he should always have been!

And as nothing comes alone in this odd life of ours—as, when fate gives one blow, fortune adds a second and chance follows up with a third—so, when fortune grants one boon, others fall from the skies at every point and the golden shower multiplies as it rains down;—thus, now when Sandro Kemp had come into this sufficient inheritance, free of work, his work was now made of supreme value. A few paragraphs from this extract stood one which Augusta also read, stating how Mr. Sandro Kemp's designs for that important cathedral had been accepted by the committee appointed to judge the work of the competitors; and how

grand the writer, who was reviewing their several merits while stating this fact, held these special designs to be. He was then rich and famous at a blow ; and she would not marry the Colonel.

And yet, had she not chilled and shocked, perhaps for ever, the man whom she knew in her own heart she loved, and who loved her ? How could she undo that fatal past ?—how make him understand that she had acted under coercion, and that what she had done had been for her child's sake and not by her own desire ? She could not write to him even to congratulate him. She could not fling herself in his way now that fortune had so richly endowed him, seeing that she had thrust him aside when he was still under the lash of fate. She had done what she believed right at the time. And yet, haunting thoughts of the sacredness of Love—of Love the best thing in life—of Love at any price and all the rest let go for him—of Love before riches—of Love even before duty ; had she not counselled this to Stella ?—of Love as the Great God, with every other virtue, every other affection, standing simply as his henchman—haunting thoughts of all this divine sacredness and of her adverse decision, came across her brain like the echoes of a triumphal

march drowned by the mournful strain of a funeral dirge. If only she had clung to Love and had abjured fear and the future! If only she had! And yet; she had done for the best. She had plucked her own breast bare and bleeding that her child might be kept safe and warm. It had turned out ill; but ever and ever she came round to that one constant point—she had done for the best. And she would not marry the Colonel.

When Colonel Money Penny came back from that troublesome bit of magisterial business which had taken him to the room he called his Justice's-room, and the constable waiting for that magical bit of paper duly signed and delivered, he was made to feel, he did not know how, that the favourable moment had passed, that the fire had burned down into ashes, that the vane of the pretty widow's humour was set to another wind, and that everything was changed.

She was her old self again—clear, candid and inscrutable; soft to the touch and unyielding at the core; sweet, sympathetic, womanly, pure womanly in manner, but, when probed, apparently destitute of all feeling, all romance, all passion, all pleasant feminine weakness; eminently her old reasonable, well-controlled

self, whom no one could soften or warm or deflect beyond the limits which she had marked out for herself. The tender darkness had gone out of her eyes; the drooping curve had left her lips; her face showed no gentle indecision, her figure no yielding lines of graceful self-abandonment. She had gone back to her old shape of waxen smoothness and adamant hardness—of crystalline clearness and crystalline inflexibility.

She was still standing by the window as he came in, but she had laid the paper on the table—the page doubled inward where she had read about Sandro Kemp.

“I think the storm is passing now,” she said cheerily, her voice as clear as a silver bell and about as soulless.

“I hope not,” said Colonel Moneypenny, making an attempt to return to his interrupted gallantries.

He spoke with a grave kind of tenderness sufficiently obvious. She laughed in her pleasant, light, superficial way.

“We shall all be snowed up if it lasts much longer!” she said.

“There might be a worse fate in store for me than to be snowed up with you as my guest,” said the Colonel.

She gave an affected little shiver and looked at him with eyes exasperatingly clear.

"What an awful idea!" she said with well-acted gaiety. "As that would never do, and may be possible, I think I had better set out at once. The wind has quite fallen, and a quiet snow-shower bursts soon."

She gave a pull at her bonnet-strings which were not untied, and smoothed down her gloves which she had not withdrawn. These actions were "survivals," and expressed her feeling of "dressing to go out."

"You cannot go out while this lasts," said Colonel Money Penny as gravely as before, but with a certain latent heat and eagerness which he had not the power to control, though he felt that it was bad policy to show too much feeling at the moment. "Why this sudden haste?" he asked, forcing a smile. "Come back to the fire and make yourself comfortable again."

"It is getting late," she said, glancing at the clock. "It will soon be quite dusk."

"You have a full half-hour of daylight yet, and I will see that you are taken care of," said the Colonel. "Come! It really is too bad for you to think of going yet!"

As he spoke the door-bell rang sharply. A trampling of feet in the hall; a sound as of

many huge dogs shaking themselves and of at least half a dozen men stamping themselves clear of something that would cling; bursts of loud laughter; shrill cries of high-pitched voices; all these were heard. And then the library-door was flung open and Georgie and Pattie Pennefather, in light drab coachman's coats, with soft felt unornamented hats and blue bird's-eye neckties came streaming into the room; the two multiplied into a small crowd by the noise and tumult and "go" of their entrance.

CHAPTER II.

TESTED FOR TRUTH.

"UPON my word!" shouted Pip as they came into the room and took in the situation at a glance—the two easy-chairs drawn close up to the fire; the wine and cake on the table; the look of home and domesticity in the whole arrangements. "Well I never!—upon my word!" she repeated.

"Oh, you sly-boots, Augusta!" vociferated Gip.

"And who would have thought it?" cried both these chartered tormentors in a breath.

"Who would have thought what, girls?" asked the widow, with smiling unconsciousness of possible evil.

"Oh, I say, that is coming it too strong! 'Who would have thought what?' when we find you sitting here like Darby and Joan, you

and the Colonel, as cozy and comfortable as you please."

"Oh! that is what you mean. Yes; is it not shocking?" returned the widow, still smiling, in her pleasant, frank, unconscious way, as if there were no evil possible in the world of man and no suspicion in the mind of woman. "But when one is caught in a storm, what is one to do?" she added with an amiable little laugh. "Bellevue or Sherrardine, or any other place of shelter, I can assure you, my dears! A cowshed in such a frightful storm as it was!"

"Oh, that is all very well," said Pip. "But what brought you out such a day as this, I should like to know? Such a chimney-corner creature as you are, what business had you to be on the tramp in weather which every one could see was going to be a buster?"

"Yes," echoed Gip; "what business had you out at all, Mrs. Augusta? Come, you have to confess, you know, so you might as well begin!"

"And what brings you two out?" said the widow, with the air of turning the tables. "I think you had better begin with your confession, and I will come after."

"Oh! we have a good reason, haven't we, George?" said Pip, diving into one of the

pockets of her coachman's box-coat, which she had opened like a man, "to get the good of when she went out again." "We have come on an errand of charity, so we are all safe. There is that poor old Reuben Norris, of Barnes," she continued, pulling out a damp bit of crumpled paper; "don't you know him?—the old creature with a wooden leg, and that hard-working Jessie of a daughter who goes out charing and more than half keeps the house? Well! poor Jessie is down with fever; and there is old Reuben crying about the lane in the snow with his wooden leg and no fire, and not a bit in the house to eat and no one to go near poor Jessie or to boil him so much as a potato-paring. They are all afraid, the cowards! So we are getting up a subscription for them; and we have got quite a nice little hatful for the poor things already. And that's why we have come here. So now that's the whole of that. And I am sure you won't refuse, Colonel?" she added with what she meant to be a coaxing accent and an irresistible look of appeal. "You'll come down handsomely like the rest, won't you?"

Now, the two things most abhorrent to Colonel Money Penny were to be chaffed for the one part and asked to subscribe for the other.

He was proud, sensitive, irritable, mean ; and that these madcap hoydens should have it in their power to talk of him, laugh at him, make fun of the visit which had gone so near to be one of the most serious matters of his life, and then that they should have asked him for a subscription in the presence of Augusta Latrobe whose good graces, though he wished to win, he thought dearly purchased by the gift of a sovereign—that they should have all this in their power annoyed and disturbed him almost beyond his power of conventional concealment.

“ Well, I don’t know about that,” he said, vigorously stirring the fire which wanted no stirring at all. “ I must first be convinced of the justice of the case. You ladies, with your charities and all the rest of it, often go beyond the borders and do more harm than the deuce,” he added irritably.

It did him good to have this little fling.

“ Oh, but Colonel Money Penny!—poor old Reuben !” said Gip, opening her eyes. Doubt, caution, inquiry holding back till fully satisfied as to the merits of a case—nothing of all this came into the Pennefather category of wise action ! “ Every one knows what a hard-working old chap he is, wooden leg and all. And there is no mistake about Jessie. She is down

with fever as sure as ever any one was; and she will not do a stroke of work for a month of Sundays. We can't be doing harm in making up a little sum for him just to help him over the style, poor old beggar!"

"Jessie won't be out for another ten weeks at the earliest—Dr. Quigley says so," chimed in Pip; "and we thought that if we could get ten or twelve pounds or so it would just keep them for the time she has got to be laid by. You can't call that pauperizing the people, as you are so fond of doing."

"Pauperizing!" said Colonel Money Penny in a voice with a decided tendency to become a growl.

"Well, pauperizing," said Pip, with a grimace.

"You made a bad shot there, Patrick, with your big words," shouted Gip with a laugh.

"No; that does seem a good case as you say, girls; does it not, Colonel Money Penny?" put in Augusta with her sweet womanly reasonable air, like a very nice-looking Themis holding the scales evenly between the two sides.

"Ah, you dear old thing! What a wise thing you are, Augusta!" said Gip, giving the widow an affectionate hug. The Doves were odd girls in the wholesale way in which they

identified themselves with any "case" like this of poor old Reuben Norris. They made it their own; and "worked it" with a superabundance of zeal and eagerness—including animosity for those who did not join with them, and overflowing affection and gratitude for those who act. "I always say to every one that Augusta Latrobe is out and out the best sort here," she added, addressing space and universe. "*You* are not a sneak," she went on, turning back to the concrete and the widow. "*You* are always fair and above board, and we all know what *you* are after!"

Her tone, as she said this, was harsh and bitter. It did no good to shoot out her arrows against Stella when neither the girl herself nor her special friend and admirer, Val, was there. But it soothed her angry passion for just the moment; and no one cared nor noticed.

"You are very kind to say so," said Augusta, that pretty pale pink flush in her cheeks, for which she was famous, deepening a little uncomfortably. "At all events, I am a true friend," she added prettily, looking at the sisters; but she meant Colonel Moneyppenny to profit by the application. He had to be flung overboard, and she would not stint soft words before the hard deed of his immolation. "Now to busi-

ness. What subscriptions are you making? How much do you want? What am I to put down?"

This ready offer of service and conformity with the general rule was magnanimous on Augusta's part. Her mother allowed her only thirty pounds a year for her own dress and menus plaisirs; just the same sum as she had when she was eighteen. And though the old woman took on herself the charge of the child's wardrobe, still, there were many little expenses for him which naturally fell on Augusta and which she could not carry over to the great account. Hence, she was emphatically "badly off;" and any kind of subscription told on her slender finances heavily. All the same she said: "What am I to put down?" with the air of one who had thousands at the back of her poor little shabby tens.

"Well, every one has given a sovereign as yet," said Pip in a doubtful tone.

She knew that Augusta was always hard up, as they called it; and though she wanted to land the Colonel's gold she was sorry to have to bait with Augusta's.

"Then I will give a sovereign also," said the widow with the tranquil stoicism of the Red Indian who parts with his pound of flesh.

"You are a darling!" said Gip.

"It is a large subscription," said the Colonel discontentedly. "Half-a-crown would have been ample!"

"Oh! we were not enough for that," said Pip. "We will bring in the little fishes after we have gaffed the big ones. The half-crowns and sixpences will come in when we have tackled all the gold we can collar. So now, Colonel, if you please. Shall I say two, as you are the only gentleman among us?"

"No," said the Colonel shortly. "One is seventeen and sixpence too much!"

"Oh!" cried Pip. "What an awful old screw you make yourself out to be, Colonel, when every one knows you are as generous as you please. Don't give yourself a bad character; and come, down with your sub handsomely."

Colonel Moneyppenny's face was, what stupid people call, "a study." He hated the Pennefather slang and rollick as bitterly as did old Mrs. Morshead herself; he was angry at the interruption and revolted at having to give his money; but he was in a trap and there was no way of escape. Sullenly he brought out his purse and had a difficulty with the clasp. When he had got it fairly open he fingered all his gold pieces one after the other, rejecting this and

that till he finally chose the one which was most worn and defaced. This he handed to Gip, with a cross: "There!" expressive of anything rather than the generosity for which Pattie had so mischievously given him credit.

"No, not to Codlin—to Short," shouted Pattie. "I'm treasurer, and George only does the touting. Very much ta'!" she added, as she took the money from her sister and put it loose into her box-coat pocket. "Now, your name, Colonel; and yours too, Augusta, please; just there—under the Branscombe fist. Shall I bracket them?" she asked audaciously after they were written; "and put Bellevue after both?"

"What a child you are, Pattie!" said Augusta, with the most careless good humour—but how her cheeks burned!

"Patrick, mind your manners," shouted her sister.

"What's the harm?" said Pattie innocently. "There's no harm, is there, Colonel? Augusta is here, isn't she?"

"So are you, Miss Pennefather," answered Colonel Money Penny with what he meant to be a significant manner.

"Yes, we are; but George and I don't count with you," returned Pip.

And at this both the Doves laughed as at an exquisite joke till the Colonel speculated privately on the possibility of turning them bodily out of his house, and retaining his gentlehood at the same time.

Gip, not actively engaged in the little skirmish of wits and having to fulfil only the light duties of laughing chorus, had been looking round the room, her bold black roving eyes searching everywhere, hungry for something to fasten on for "chaff." She saw the newspaper lying on the table; and took it up. It was the same as that which they affected at Sherrardine and of which she religiously skimmed the smaller items of news every morning.

"Oh, Augusta," she shouted; "did you see that your old flame, Sandro Kemp, has had a fortune left him? His brother has died and Sandro has come in for all the tin. And he has come in too, for no end of kudos for something he has done—I don't know what exactly; a church or a workhouse, or something; but it seems a very fine set-out according to the paper. Ain't you glad? I am. He was always a good fellow, though he was as dull as old boots. He *was* heavy, and no mistake! I shall never forget him at our picnic in the summer. He was that dismal—I never saw! Still, I am glad

that he has tumbled into all these good things, ain't you?"

Colonel Money Penny's thin and puckered face became livid; Augusta's, fair, smooth, soft, was crimson.

"Indeed?" she said with as much ease as she could assume; but her breath was the least in the world interrupted.

"I should have thought you would have known first of all people. You and he were always such chums together," said Gip, with all her old spirited audacity, laughing and twinkling her bold bright eyes as she spoke.

Augusta laughed too.

"I was always supposed to be Mr. Kemp's mysterious confidante," she said quite pleasantly; "but I knew no more of him than the rest. However, I am glad of his good fortune."

"You hadn't seen it?" said Gip with no ulterior motive. "It is in this very paper," fluttering the leaves.

"Is it? I had the paper in my hand," said Augusta with deliberate prevarication and intention to mislead.

"It was odd you did not see it," said Colonel Money Penny speaking slowly, his eyes levelled at that fair and practically mendacious face, and his bitter voice full of doubt.

“I should, if I had read it,” she answered smiling.

But for all her self-control, and though she tried, she could not look into the Colonel’s face when she spoke.

“He will be quite a swell now!” said the innocent mischief-maker with a loud laugh. “My goodness! fancy old Sandro Kemp a swell! He will not be his old stupid self if he’s a swell!” she said with another peal, in which her sister joined.

“He had better return here, if he has money. He went, I remember, suddenly—they said he ran away from his creditors,” said the Colonel, biting off each word and speaking with uncontrollable malice and spite.

“Did he, now?” answered Gip meditatively. “I didn’t think that, Colonel. I think old Kemp was an honest old chap. Mrs. Prinsep says so—though he was as dull as old boots and as heavy as lead.”

“And I don’t; and I have good reason to know,” said Colonel MoneyPENNY viciously.

And his falsehood, though indirect, was a worse crime than Augusta’s, which was apparently the more brazen and sinful.

“Well, we never know who’s who!” half sighed Gip, from the sorrowful experience of

Val's defection and Stella's sneakiness. "At all events," she added, turning again to Augusta with that odd kind of sudden affection which meant less love for her than a blow at these two absent sinners: "*You* are true, Augusta; *you* are not a sneak; *you* don't tell lies; *you* wouldn't say one thing and mean another and change your mind half a dozen times a day! And *you* wouldn't pretend to care for one man when all the time you were bringing on another!"

"No," said Augusta, just as she had said "No" to her knowledge of Sandro Kemp's good fortune.

"Well, girls," said Pip suddenly; "if you are going to stay here all day I'm not. I have to go. You may do as you like."

"All right, Patrick," said Gip; "I'm ready. We can leave Augusta," she added slyly.

"No; I am coming too," said the widow; and the Colonel this time made no objection.

The fire had burned out in very truth and only dull dead ashes were left. And yet how near a thing it had been!—how near!

The irruption of these curly-headed savages was so far to Augusta's good, in that she was able to answer her mother and baffle her, while giving an account of herself that should conceal

what she did not wish to have known without the need of another direct falsehood. This dangerous weapon of defence the poor widow reserved as a last resource on grand and perilous occasions. Had she been rebuked, she would have justified herself by saying that she never told untruths when she could possibly avoid it. True, she did not always tell all that was ; but reticence was not necessarily falsehood ; and Mrs. Morshead was undoubtedly a dangerous woman in whom to confide. And then Augusta made the distinction which many others make between active and negative falsehoods ; also between those which do harm to others and those which only protect ourselves.

When she had taken off her walking-things, and been for a little time with her boy—whom she found crying for her return, restless, feverish, peevish and unlike himself—she went into the drawing-room to her mother. The red fire was low in the grate, a mass of flameless cinders giving heat but no light ; the lamp had not yet been brought in ; the shutters were not closed ; the curtains were not drawn ; out of doors could be seen only the black branches of the leafless trees, the solemn whiteness of the snow, the grey look of the sky ; within, was the lonely old woman, there in the dim light of the

melancholy evening, sitting silent and stiff in her high-backed chair like a grim sentinel of sorrow, without work in her hands as without joy or love or gladness in her life. She was quite alone. Even her cat had left her, and she had dismissed her maid sharply. She was glooming over her daughter's prolonged absence, and fearing she scarcely knew what; reproaching her bitterly by her voluntary thoughts, but reproaching herself more bitterly in her involuntary conscience.

The dull lifelessness of it all—the want of brightness, of welcome, of the sense of home and peace, struck on the widow with painful force. It seemed to her that she was returning to her prison, if not her grave. And after that glance of possible companionship with Colonel Moneypenny—that dream, spoilt as it was, of possible happiness with Sandro—this miserable, uncongenial, loveless home was a veritable torture. Anything rather than this!—yes, for herself, anything! But her boy, her little son—for him she must still suffer and be strong.

“Oh, that is you, is it?” said Mrs. Morshead, as she came in, with the child in her hand. “And where have you been all this time, I should like to know? I was just beginning to wonder if you ever meant to condescend so far

as to come home at all or no. Going out on such a day as this! One would think you had St. Vitus's dance and could not sit still! Where have you been, I say?" sharply.

"I came home with the Pennefather girls," said Augusta prevaricating.

"Well, you are the most extraordinary young woman I ever saw, and the most inconsiderate!" said Mrs. Morshead. "You go out and come in just as you like, and treat me with no more consideration than if I were a shoeblack. You never ask my leave, but just go tramping about, here and there, as if you were mistress of everything and I had nothing to do but to find money and food and clothing for you and that boy of yours. Troublesome little toad! I have heard him crying at least a dozen times since you went out. What you are made of I can't think, to go and leave the poor fellow as you do. You are an odd kind of mother, I must say! Like daughter like mother—and so it is, sure enough."

"Hush, mother," said Augusta with strange and sudden sternness. "I cannot bear it! You must not, you must not!" she added, her voice full of something so unusual to her, so unnatural, that her little boy squared his lips almost in fear, and her mother very nearly

started. It was like a transformation—the sudden putting on of a wolf’s fangs in the lamb, of an eagle’s beak and claws in the dove.

“Well, I’m sure! What next, I should like to know? I am not mistress in my own house, I suppose? I am not the owner? You are a bad-tempered and impertinent girl, that is what you are; but you always were, so I suppose I must put up with it. But don’t let me have any more of your insolence, for *I* cannot bear it; and so I tell you! And perhaps you will be so very condescending as to ring the bell for the lamp, if it is not asking too much of you!”

The words were aggravating and harsh enough; and the voice was no softer than the words; but by that certain subtle something in her manner which tells of defeat, even when a brave front is kept, Augusta knew that her mother had been dominated and that for the next few hours there would be no more active insult.

The day had been so full of emotion, of distress, of false security and real danger, of regret and excitement generally, that the naturally calm nerves and quiet self-command of the widow had broken under the strain and she found herself unable to bear the old woman’s

acid humour with her usual serenity. Her mother recognized the strain also, and was wise enough not to hang on it more than she could help, so that the next few hours did, as Augusta expected, pass in comparative quietness. The little fellow sat in his mother's lap amused by a book of pictures, either not speaking at all or speaking below his breath; but he was languid and very feverish, and Augusta had some difficulty in keeping him from being fretful—which would have drawn down on him the wrath of his grandmother, always so ready to be drawn down on his poor little sunny head!

Later in the evening however, he seemed to grow so much worse that when Augusta came from putting him to bed she said with a white face:

“Tony seems very ill to-night, mamma; will you let me send for Dr. Quigley?”

“What has the child got?” snapped the old woman. “He is always ill, or something!”

“I do not know, but he is feverish and certainly very much out of sorts. His little hands are burning and his face is as hot as fire,” answered Tony's mother, trembling.

“Oh, it is nothing! You make such a fuss about him! It is only a feverish cold that he

has. Give him a little sweet spirits-of-nitre and wrap him up well. You would take him out the other day when I told you not, and warned you ; so now you are punished for your obstinacy, as I said you would be."

Mrs. Morshead gave her shawl the well-known twitch when she said this, and seemed prepared for a quarrel.

"That was ten days ago. He took no cold then, and this is not a feverish cold," said Augusta firmly. "I think Dr. Quigley ought to be sent for," she repeated.

"You are not over thoughtful for that poor man, nor for any one else—sending out on such a night as this," said Mrs. Morshead.

"May I ask John to go?" repeated Augusta.

"I don't believe there's the smallest occasion," answered the old woman. "You frighten yourself for nothing at all about that child. If his finger aches you think he is going to die, and it is the doctor here and the doctor there ; such nonsense !"

"If I may not send John I must go myself," said Augusta with her well-known quiet tenacity ; "but I want to stay with my boy."

"Oh ! have your own way, for goodness' sake, and don't worry me any more !" said Mrs. Morshead angrily. "Send for Dr. Quigley, or

a dozen doctors if you like—send for Dr. Mann, from Lingston, now at once if you choose—but for mercy's sake do let me have a little peace! I am sick to death of all this noise and confusion. Of all the worrying, troublesome girls I ever met in my life, Augusta, you are the worst; and do leave me in peace!"

So the doctor was sent for, and when he came he would not give a decided opinion.

"It is fever," he said.

But whether it would turn out to be measles, scarlet-fever, or something else, neither he nor any one else could tell at this early stage. All that the mother knew was, that her little boy was ill and that she must stand between him and death—if she could.

CHAPTER III.

TURNING THE KNIFE.

IT would not have been the Pennefathers if they had not sent over to Jack in exile all the news which they could scrape together. Still less would it have been they if they had not widened all the borders and deepened all the lines, so that everything should be presented in such vivid colours as would "amuse the poor old chap" and give him a good grip on things as they were at the old place. And among the rest they told him all about Valentine Cowley's shameful and outrageous conduct in "following up" Stella Branscombe; though why shameful and outrageous they forgot to explain. And then they launched out into denunciations of Stella's horrible "sneakiness" in allowing herself to be followed up at all, and her sinful humbug in bringing Val on as she did while

pretending all the time that she did not. That Stella was this sneak which they determined to prove her, they still further evidenced by saying, in true Pennefather style, how she was never out of Ran Mac's pocket, and how Ran followed her about like a shadow, and looked at Val just as one dog looks at another with a bone between. "And for the matter of that," said Gip, who was the scribe on this occasion: "Stella Branscombe is little better than a bone—such a lean, scraggy, washed-out thread-paper as she has grown! What Val or any one else can see in her I can't tell; and no one else can so far as I can make out! Little wretch she is!"—Gip went on to say, indignation running off with her pen like an unbitted horse; "there is Val making up to her no end, and looking such a loon when he does!—and Ran is never out of her pocket; and she is all the while putting on lackadaisical fine-lady airs as if she were breaking her heart for that good-for-nothing Cyril over in India. Isn't it a screaming farce?—a screaming shame, too!"

Such a multiplicity of adorers was indeed an offence against good morals in the Pennefather code, because it was an offence against justice and good fellowship, fair dealing and doing by others as you would be done by. And these

are virtues of the first magnitude in a society mainly composed of marriageable maidens where, if things are to hold together at all, the whole duty of a girl is to be content with her own lover and not to poach on her neighbours' preserves.

And as Stella Branscombe, whether wilfully or innocently—they said wilfully—had offended against this code, and had poached on Georgie Pennefather's preserves, it was only right and fitting that she should be “trounced;” and trounced she was accordingly.

If such a letter as this from the old home was as of course, it was also as of course that Jack should ride over to Cyril the day after its reception, to pour out all the gossip contained therein as a sieve would let down a bucket of water. There was not the slightest intention of paining Cyril or of doing Stella any harm by this generous transfer of Highwood news. Jack was too kind-hearted to intentionally hurt any one; but he had the Pennefather insensitiveness and want of imagination; and facts were to him the only things in the world. It would have been to him like taking aim at a cloud had he been asked to allow for feelings in his dealings with facts. If Stella and Val were putting their horses' heads together, they were,

and there was no use in denying it ; and if Ran lived in her pocket, and went after her like a shadow, and looked at Val across her shoulders as a dog looks at another over a bone, he did ; and there was no use in denying that either. So he presented both items of news to Cyril ; as he would have told him that a certain cricket-match had been lost, or a certain boat-race had been won ; and left him to make the best of them at his leisure.

The result was a letter to Randolph which pained that faithful chum even more than had the former whereof the eloquent omissions had made poor Stella cry. It was a mad, wild, wicked letter, suggestive of everything rather than an honest man's rightness of life or a gentleman's nobility of feeling. It was a letter which seemed as if Cyril must have been out of his sober self when he wrote it ; or as if, which was worse, his physical sense being straight, his mind had gone aslant and his soul had become poisoned by recklessness and vice. In it he spoke of Randolph's secretaryship and devotion to the Branscombe family with a ferocious disdain which made Pylades wince. It did not comfort him to say to himself that the keynote of this ferocity was jealousy ; and that Orestes, banished and dispossessed, would

have been neither ferocious nor jealous had he not still been in love. We do not reason on the exact shape of a wound while we are smarting from the pain; and the rough, rude and sneering tone of this letter was a wound to the good friend who had made himself the watch-dog guarding the absent chum's ewe lamb from the wolves. Perhaps Asmodeus might have whispered with a laugh: *Quis custodiet?* Failing Asmodeus the honest fellow's loyalty was without a flaw, and the return was—this black ingratitude!

But so much may be said for Cyril—to people at a distance the most exaggerated reports come like gospel truths, and few stop to sift or analyze. And he was not one of those few. He had always had unbounded trust both in Randolph and Stella; but he knew human nature, he said to himself after the manner of those who blaspheme it, and he was prepared for treachery even from him, and for infidelity even from her. Wherefore he first chaffed Pylades about the secretaryship, and then he added:—“From what I hear however, you cannot be going for the gloves, as the fair lady in question has apparently made her choice; and the two strings to her bow, of which you are only one, poor old man! have coalesced into

a single line of catgut—Mr. Valentine Cowley ! They say that orange-blossoms may be looked for in that quarter before long. I should like to have a square inch of the bride-cake, just to see how it looks.” Then, warming to his mad work, one thought engendering another and fear exaggerating doubt, he added an unworthy bit of moral bravado, which was essentially despair, and said :—“ Well ! I am no dog in the manger. As I cannot marry Miss Stella Branscombe myself, I hope she will find her happiness with Mr. Valentine Cowley, though I would rather she had chosen you. So you see, old fellow, the sublime state of philosophy to which I have brought myself. Give me credit for the endeavour. And read this to Stella. I wish it. It will set to rest any little lingering feeling that she may still have for me, and I owe it to myself that she should not think I am breaking my heart for her or because of this marriage. Having once thrown me over all the rest comes easy.” And then he added : “ Perhaps I shall follow her example myself one of these days. We have no end of nice girls floating about here ; and a man might do worse than take one of them to himself. We shall see. At all events, it is on the cards.”

This letter placed Randolph in a difficult

position. He was one of those blindly-faithful men who obey against their own better reason. If Cyril commanded him to tell Stella what he had said, Randolph saw no way out of the obligation. The whole thing was a frightfully painful tangle from first to last; but, coupled with Jack's reports of Cyril's "goings on" with Mrs. White, it did really seem a renunciation of the past and the playing away of trust after hope! And perhaps, if Cyril had really not only given up all claim on Stella, but all desire of future holding, it would be better to tell her, so that she should not break her heart for a man who had so satisfactorily patched up his own.

All the same, Randolph knew that nothing was really "on" between Stella and Valentine Cowley; and he could not very well show her what Cyril had said about himself. But he had to tell her something. And even if he had decided on keeping silence his manner would have betrayed him, as it always did when any trouble brooded over his face and his heart, like a fog between earth and sky.

Since that evening at the Lyons', Cyril's name had not been mentioned at Rose Hill. Mr. Branscombe had contented himself with a few slighting allusions to false gods and women

who declined on lower levels ; and Hortensia had taken occasion once or twice to declaim against the wickedness of modern youth in general, and to say how far the men of the elder generation surpassed them in nobility and refinement. To all of which Stella had given a calm and impersonal kind of assent, as to vague propositions which had no special application to her ; while stiffening her slender neck so that no one should see what she felt or if indeed she felt anything at all. Those cruel words were the cross on which she hung the garlands of her faith, of her denial, her constancy, her love. She would as soon have denied her religion as have doubted Cyril Ponsonby—an unspoiled woman having at least this advantage over the nobler sex, in that “knowledge of human nature” does not include with her pessimistic unbelief or blasphemous denial. She may be ignorant, enthusiastic, credulous, blind. Be it so. She has for compensation the happiness of ever living with her ideal enthroned in the innermost recesses of her heart—of holding the man whom she has once loved to be ever worthy of her love—and she escapes the pain of doubting the divine, and the sacrilege of making war on her gods.

Her eyes made quick by suffering and keen

by love, Stella saw that something ailed her good friend and self-appointed watch-dog—her father's secretary and Cyril's representative. She guessed at once that it had reference to Cyril. Cyril—and all that grew about him as the suckers from a rosebush, the shoots of a vine—were the Alpha and Omega of her relations with Randolph. She was his Star to him; he was only the reflection of her Love to her. Were Cyril to pass out of her memory Randolph would pass out of her life, as the shadow fades away when the sun goes down. While the one lived and was loved—and while he lived he would be loved!—his friend would be hers, because part of himself by association. To love Randolph was one way of expressing love for Cyril; just as if this good and faithful Pylades had been a horse or a dog which Cyril had confided to her hands, and which was therefore sacred to her because it had been dear to him.

Hence, when she saw that something was amiss with Randolph she thought of Cyril; and when she said: "Randolph, what is the matter?" she did not mean "with you?" but "with Cyril?"

"Why do you ask, Miss Stella?" he said in confusion.

“Because I can see that something is wrong,” was her reply.

“I wish you had not asked!” he said again, looking at her sorrowfully.

“But you must tell me,” she returned with a certain serious authority, a certain gentle queenliness which it was impossible for him to disobey.

Nevertheless, though he knew he must yield in the end, he hung back now and hesitated, unwilling to strike the blow which would pain her so acutely.

“I would rather not,” he said reluctantly.

“Tell me,” she said again with her gentle peremptoriness.

“I have heard from Cyril,” he began; and then he stopped. At that moment he realized the whole anguish of Jephthah, the tragic obedience to his vow to Agamemnon.

“Well? from Cyril,” she repeated; the colour deepening on her face, but no glad smile on her lips, no sunshine or delight in her eyes. “What does he say? What does he write about?” she asked.

“He has heard something about Valentine Cowley,” said Randolph with the blundering honesty of a faithful servant doing his duty and devoid of tact.

The blood left her face and then came back till her cheeks burned as if with fever.

"Yes?" she said, as quietly as she could speak. "What has he heard?"

"That you are engaged and going to be married," said Randolph.

Now the worst was over. The murder was out and no more remained behind!

"Does he believe it?" asked Stella, speaking slowly.

He hung his head. This feeling of relief and the worse known was premature. The poison-bag had yet another drop; and he must empty it on her heart.

"Yes," he answered in a low voice.

"He does?—He believes it, Randolph?"

"Yes."

She was silent for a few moments, silent because a little stunned. It was a cruel return for her own faith in him. She had refused to believe a word to his discredit, and she had defended him publicly in the face of the world. At the first lying report, his faith in her had gone into dust and he believed her capable of an act of infidelity which with her took rank as a crime.

"And what does he say?" she asked after a pause.

She too must turn the knife in her wound after the manner of the tortured.

"He sends his congratulations," said Randolph; "and hopes you will be happy."

"He wants me to marry?"

"He did not say that he wanted you to marry," he answered.

"But he does not disapprove?"

"No; he does not disapprove."

"And he congratulates me?"

"Yes; he congratulates you," repeated the poor watch-dog sadly.

She held her head high. An odd look of pride struggled with her pain, and on the whole perhaps, overcame it.

"I shall never marry Valentine Cowley, who, in the first place, has not asked me," she said; "but do not say so to Cyril," she added imperiously. "If he doubts me he must; but I will not do anything to undeceive him. You will do as I say, Randolph? You will not tell him that it is all a mistake, and that I am not going to be married to any one? If you say anything about me, merely say that you told me; and nothing more. You will do this?" she asked again.

"Yes," he answered humbly.

"Nothing about me; nothing; not a word!"

she repeated passionately. "Only that you gave me his message. It was a message, Randolph, was it not?"

"Yes," he said, still so humble in his consciousness of crime and cruelty. "He said I was to tell you."

"Well, say that you told me—that you gave me his message and that I said nothing," reiterated Stella, her passion deepening. "I rely on you to do this."

"You may; I will do just as you say," he answered. "Oh, how sorry I am about it all! What miserable work all this gossip is!"

"He will know better some day," she said with vehemence and pride together. Then, suddenly relaxing into the self-pity of surprise at his distrust, she added tremulously: "I should have thought he would have known better now."

And with this her passion broke; the unnatural strain relaxed; and she hurried from the room because she could not control her weakness and did not wish even her good friend and watch-dog to discover it.

It was a fair and sunny afternoon, and Hortensia Lyon was with them as one of the family. Indeed she was now almost as much one of the Branscombe family as of her own.

Randolph had done his work for the day and had been dismissed; and the three sat in the study in spite of Dr. Quigley and his advice—an artistic fever-fit being at this moment strong on Mr. Branscombe. Stella was paler even than usual, pallid as she always was; and a certain feverish irritability of manner, a certain strained hardness of expression made her as unlike her ordinary self as this cruel distrust was unlike the Cyril of her love. Her voice had a thin metallic ring in it, which of itself betrayed suffering; for when the naturally hard become unnaturally soft, and the soft make themselves hard, then we may know that the shadowy arrow has struck and that the wound is bleeding inwardly. And at this moment poor Stella's heart was bleeding in such sort that all her joy, all her hope and peace and happiness and love, now and to come, seemed ebbing away for ever. But she was brave through it all, and gave no other sign than was to be found in this curiously hard and feverish manner, this thin metallic ring in her voice.

“Have you heard that Mrs. Latrobe's little boy is very ill?” asked Hortensia, breaking the silence which had fallen on the trio.

It was a silence which had come upon an

interchange of flatteries between the elderly idol and his young devotee, wherein each had presented the other with a piece of moral embroidery of unusual brilliancy, and both had accepted the offering with perfect good faith in its fitness.

Hortensia was at this moment sitting to Mr. Branscombe as Una. His model for the lion was one of those natural-history cards which are published for schools and coloured by the intelligent foreman of the printing-works. Mr. Branscombe had enlarged the copy and gone beyond the foreman in his reds and browns; so that he had made a very queer-looking thing on the whole, like nothing so much as a pincushion. Una was a respectable marionnette, a little dislocated; but the original was charmed with herself as seen on the canvas, and, her mind bringing the desire to find perfection, she found it.

“Have you heard of it, Stella?” asked Hortensia, in the patronizing tone which had become habitual to her now when addressing her elderly idol’s unsatisfactory daughter.

“No,” answered Stella, taken out of her own thoughts as by a violent wrench. “When did you hear it?—and when was he taken ill?”

“A few days ago. I know it from the

Pennefathers. They called yesterday about a subscription for that old Reuben Norris who lives out at Barnes, and they told us. The little boy has some kind of dreadful fever. I do not know what it is, but he is very ill and Dr. Quigley thinks rather seriously of him."

"I should like to go and inquire," said Stella, rising with nervous haste.

"My dear, unreasonable, impulsive child!—a malignant fever of an unknown character, and you entering the house? Is that wise, my little daughter?" asked Mr. Branscombe, in a sweetly repressive manner—wisdom laying a large cool hand on the feverish head of folly. "A note by a servant will be sufficient."

"Should I run any danger, papa, by simply inquiring at the door?" asked Stella.

She was so unhappy herself, she felt as if she must go to Augusta who was even more unhappy. Community of sorrow seems somehow to soothe and lighten individual pain; and the folly of all this flattery between her father and Hortensia, always revolting, jarred on her to-day almost beyond bearing. If Randolph Mackenzie had been there she might have endured it better. As it was, the irritation that it roused in her was more than she could well suppress. She did not know how it had come

about, but always, always now, she found herself set in some kind of antagonism to her father. And as for Hortensia—had she been able to do as she would, she would have cut short their friendly intimacy to a handshake on the Sunday, and would have felt the cessation of their daily intercourse almost as restful as sleep.

“No ; you must not go,” said Mr. Branscombe with less suavity and more decision.

“But, papa——” began Stella.

“If your father says not, Stella?” said Hortensia with a grave reproving air.

“My dear, do as you are bid ;—write a note and send it by the groom,” said Mr. Branscombe with still less suavity and still more decision. “Take a pattern from your excellent little friend and do not for ever dispute my will in this childish manner.”

Stella did not answer. She felt terribly rebellious and impatient, and wanted to break out into open wrath against this excellent little friend ; but she bit her lips with a vexed air ; held her peace ; and wrote her note to Augusta saying that she would, if she could, call at the house to-morrow to learn all particulars. Then she sealed her envelope and sent off the note by the servant, and took up a piece of em-

broidery which suddenly had become as distasteful as everything else in life.

Hortensia was sitting absolutely like a statue. Her eyes were as fixed as if they had been of glass. Save for the light rise and fall of the severely-cut gown, covering her small childish bosom, she might have been a clothed and painted statue, lifeless for all eternity.

"How can you sit so still? I declare you do not even wink," suddenly cried Stella with odd petulance. "I should stiffen into stone if I sat as you do."

"But then I am not impatient," said Hortensia. "It is no trouble to me to sit still and think."

"You are the most perfect model in all respects," said Mr. Branscombe enthusiastically. "You were born for the studio."

"You are so good to say so! I am always so pleased when I do anything that pleases you—so proud to be praised by you!" said Hortensia with maidenly modesty, but turning her eyes on Mr. Branscombe with their well-known look of adoration.

"My praise will not content you for long, I am afraid," returned Finery Fred with a tender and regretful kind of gallantry, a marshalling, as it were, of his sixty winters in front of her

nineteen summers. "Some day others, more appropriate, will give you the happiness that you ought to have; but none will be so sincere as those of your old friend at Rose Hill."

"Yours will content me for ever," said Hortensia, humble, devout, adoring.

He turned to her with a smile. It was the smile of handsome Fred Branscombe when he had picked up another foolish, fluttering little heart and was holding it in his hand as a study.

Stella flushed to the roots of her hair. She felt that things could not go on long as they were. Her dislike of Hortensia was growing daily, and would soon burst through the present bounds of prudence and reserve. She could not bear it much longer—she knew that she could not! Irritable, nervous, sore as she was to-day, this sentimental flirtation between her father and the little Puritan tried her to the utmost. She did not see it as flirtation—that is not the word which she would have given it. She saw it more as an encroachment on her own domain, and was jealous, not of the future but of the present.

"I shall become quite jealous of you, Hortensia," she said in a forced manner—forced because attempting to be gay and careless while

in reality she was angry and disturbed. "You make too much of papa."

"What an odd thing to say!" said Hortensia, opening her eyes with her now usual look of reproof. "Can any one make too much of your father?"

"His daughter apparently thinks so," said Mr. Branscombe, with what was meant to be a pained but always generous smile of magnanimity.

"I do not like any one to take my place," said Stella, laying her hand on her father's arm.

"Then you are not going to be jealous; you are so already," returned Hortensia with prim logic. "And to be jealous is to be naughty."

"I am not apt to feel things without a cause. If I am jealous I have cause," said Stella, with her array of logic.

"You have no cause, my dear Stella," said her father gravely.

"People are often jealous for no reason whatever. And Stella has none to be jealous of poor little insignificant me," said Hortensia with the deepest humility, tears coming into her eyes as she spoke.

"No daughter would like to feel that she was being supplanted," said Stella, flashing out

the secret fire which was so difficult to damp down.

"It is too bad of you to say that!" said Hortensia angrily. "How cruel you are, Stella! I did not think you could have been so cruel!"

"Hush! hush, my children!" broke in Mr. Branscombe's level, artificial voice. "What a pair of foolish young creatures you are!" he added with a not displeased smile. He rather liked indeed, this little passage of arms of which he had been the cause, though it was only between a couple of children—of whom one was his own daughter. Still, it was better than nothing; and undoubtedly it both soothed and inspirited him. But now he turned to Stella.

"My dear," he said with his well-worn urbanity of manner; "no daughter need fear to be supplanted so long as she does her duty. While you are conscious of doing your duty in a whole-hearted and unbroken chain of thoughts and actions, be not afraid of your charming little friend here, nor of any other. The fear and the remedy lie in your own hands. Your position with your father depends on yourself alone. Jealousy is the mark of a vulgar mind and a bad conscience; I do not wish to think

you possess the one or the other. And now, my dear Una, attention, if you please. I am just at the delicate curves of your exceedingly dainty and difficult little mouth, and it is essential that we have peace and quiet. My Genius is a very Egeria, and needs the sweet influence of repose if she is to guide my hand to good work. So please remain as you are. You are perfect, my little friend—absolutely perfect!”

CHAPTER IV.

TAKING BREATH.

THE next few weeks passed quietly. Local history stood still, and nothing was afloat save the illness of Mrs. Latrobe's child, and the speculations of the neighbours as to whether Dr. Quigley would pull the little fellow through or no. Winter was slowly passing into spring—very slowly indeed—like the tardy waking of a sluggard who will not raise himself to active life; and the moment was emphatically one of suspended animation and taking breath all round.

To Stella it was as if she had come into a strange phase of existence where she had to learn a new language and forget her old songs. She and Randolph Mackenzie had now nothing to say to each other, and spent their time, when they were together, in staring blankly at the

dead past. The fertile theme of converse was closed against them, and they stood in dumb distress before the shut gates of their forbidden pleasance. Cyril, who had been their one inexhaustible subject of living talk, lay now as a dumb, dead thing between them. They thought of nothing else, but they never spoke of him; and they had nothing else to speak of. Therefore, the presence of that good, honest-hearted if stupid-headed Pylades, which had always brought with it the reflected lustre of memory and association, became now as dark as the rest; and poor Stella had no more of that moonlight-coloured happiness, which until now it had been his appointed mission to bestow.

Also, without doubt, she had lost her old place with her father—and Hortensia Lyon had taken it; and as yet she scarcely understood the boundaries of her new sphere, or could say when or where Hortensia had dispossessed her. An odd kind of coolness had sprung up between daughter and father, which both felt and which neither would have confessed nor could perhaps have assigned to its exact cause. Certainly, she had broken down under the strain of her close attendance on him after her mother's death, so that he had been forced to have a secretary to do the work for which, since nature

had so manifestly consecrated her, he thought that love should have made her strong enough. And she knew that he was disappointed and annoyed with her because of her failure—a failure which Hortensia always accentuated so bitterly and against which she placed in contrast herself and her devotion, as a shining statue of silver against a dull background of lead.

Yet Stella could not beg her father to let her take up her dropped burden. She could not!—no, not even if that should include his renewed approbation! She felt that it was better for both, and better even for her love for him, that she knew little of, and was associated not at all with, the life of that stifling studio. The work, in the admiration of which she had been brought up as in a fixed doctrine of righteousness, had become quite another thing to her of late from what it had been in the old days of reverent worship, when her mother had impressed on her, as the eleventh commandment, the majesty of papa's genius, the gloriousness of its results, and the indisputable right of the domestic Apollo to her very life and her first cares. Stella had not yet come to Mrs. Morshead's state of mind when she could call it all “horrid stuff” and “vile balderdash.” That would have been

a species of blasphemy still to her. But she was in the state when the paternal poetry and music were inexpressibly wearisome; when she had no kind of interest in the paternal pictures; and when the whole thing was to her dry husks and lifeless chaff. It was all her own fault, that she knew; still, there it was, and she could not conceal it from herself!

Beyond this unconfessed coolness because of her intellectual defection from her duty stood Hortensia, as even a graver cause for sorrow. Creeping into Stella's rightful place in Mr. Branscombe's heart, nearer and nearer as the days went on, the little Puritan was indeed taking that place which was the daughter's and should have remained hers to the end. But how to cut the ground from under those stealthy crafty feet? She, Stella, could not tell her father that he was not to write odes and sonnets to Hortensia Lyon, because she, his daughter, was jealous and did not like it. Neither could she tell Hortensia that she was not to be her father's model, now as Una, now as Miranda, again as Evangeline, and again as only herself idealized, because she, her friend, was jealous of that too, and did not like it. She had to bear it quietly, whether she liked it or no; and her feelings in the matter made no part of the play.

Again, she knew that she was displeasing this dear father of hers about Valentine Cowley. He held to their frequent correspondence, and she, knowing all that she did, shrank from it as falsehood, treachery, desecration, and a dozen other bad things, like so many snakes in a basket. And Mr. Branscombe resented nothing so much as disobedience to his will. But that he should so hold to this correspondence was a puzzle which Stella could not understand, look at it how she would. He so careful, so delicate, so fastidious as he was about the conduct of women, to force her into this frequent interchange of letters with a young man for whom she had no special liking—to rebuke her as he did if her answers were too short, too tardy, too lifeless—and to praise the young fellow himself at the expense of all other men, and especially at the expense, by implication, of poor Cyril and his friend Randolph Mackenzie; what did it all mean? Over and over again that swift glance of terror at the coming awakening, which Sandro Kemp had once seen, translated itself into a rapid thought of doubt and anguish. No; it could not be called a thought; it had not formulated itself so plainly as that. It was only a vague sensation, a blinding flash of fear lest some day she should see clearly to find her

father less than the godlike being she had been taught to believe him—his genius a sham behind which his vanity was the only living thing—that vanity the real cause of her mother's death—and his dealing with herself eminently and entirely cruel, selfish, unfair and unfatherly. She did not think all this in so many set terms : she only dumbly feared and unconsciously foresaw. But just as the lagging spring, though slowly was surely awakening out of the sleep of winter, so would that drowsy sentiment of hers one day break into life and confession. And then all dumb doubt and love-created denial would be at an end.

Times were hard with poor Stella at this moment. Beginning to unconsciously suspect the flimsy pretentiousness of her beloved father—a certain estrangement setting in between them—jealous of Hortensia, whose influence somehow wrought against her, she scarcely knew how—the girl was also unutterably distressed by this correspondence with Valentine Cowley. Forced on her by the one to whom she would naturally have looked for protection against an intimacy which she herself did not desire, what could she do ? Every week Val wrote to her one or more long, long letters, to which she sometimes said to her father, passionately, she

would not reply. For rare as passion used to be with Stella in the days gone by, it was unhappily by no means infrequent now; and if her father sometimes said he did not know his child—his sweet and placid child—in the irritable and nervous rebel whose will so often came into collision with his own, Stella did not know herself. She used to be dreadfully sorry and ashamed of herself; she would resolve to be more patient and self-restrained another time; not to let little things annoy her as they did; not to be so irritable with Hortensia; not to be so strange and sore with her father. Yet something stronger than herself seemed to possess her on the next occasion, and she stood before the dark shadow of her new self terrified, repentant, but somehow unable to do better.

If only she could cut short this correspondence with Valentine Cowley! She thought that everything would go so much more smoothly if she were but fairly rid of this oppressive incubus. How she hated those long letters of his, all about nothing, as they were, yet always with a secret thread, a hidden core, which she would not recognize and could not deny! This last, over the answer to which she and her father had had something like a quarrel, what nonsense it all was! She cared

nothing for the "Earthly Paradise," nor for the "Stones of Venice"; the "Story of the Golden Fleece," nor that of the "Apples of the Hesperides"; the description of the old church at Torcello and the meaning of its architecture, nor for the fine fancy which tossed up in solid foam the cupolas of St. Mark, and that, as fine, which chronicled the deed. All this was of course intellectually true enough, she dared say, but she really had no interest in it; and still less in the little undercurrent of personal application which carried these surface-flowers of eloquence to their destination. And when her father, to whom she gave the letter unopened, launched out in praise of its beauty of thought and picturesqueness of expression, its tender tone of poetry, its sweet religiousness of feeling, and called on her to laud with him the writer of such an admirable essay, she could not bring herself to be his echo—she could not, and she would not! Nor would she answer this letter itself. A few significant phrases embedded in the more purely literary mass frightened and repelled her. Val once spoke of the future in connection with her as a mysterious happiness lying in his way; and once he hinted at the time when he should be able to direct her mind to his favourite subjects more thoroughly than now, and to take joy

in her companionship on his special line of thought. The words came in quite naturally and as if born of the preceding phrases. All the same they revolted Stella; and she felt that she must put a stop to this correspondence before she had been further committed.

She was not a girl to think a man in love with her because he liked her society. And of herself she had not seen in Val what the outside world had detected clearly enough. But she was by no means a fool, and had her possibilities of enlightenment free of vanity, like others. And she had been enlightened, as we know. Wherefore it was that she suddenly took her stand, and, in spite of her father's displeasure, said with strange passion:

"Papa! I will not write any more to Mr. Cowley. His letters do not interest me. I am tired of them."

"My will, my dear Stella, is that you do write," her father answered with quiet firmness and majestic decision.

"You will not force me when it is so much against my inclination?" said Stella, turning to him a white face and a pair of dark, wide-opened eyes.

"I would have your inclination run parallel with my own," was his reply.

“It cannot, papa. I hate these letters!” said Stella warmly. “Why should I write to a young man like Mr. Cowley?” she continued indignantly. “He is the only man to whom I do write—why should I to him? I do not care for him half as much as I care for James Pennefather, or for even poor dear noisy Jack; and I do not write to them.”

“My dear, when you can compare a young man of Mr. Valentine Cowley’s superior acquirements to two such earthworms, such mere clods and beetles as the Pennefathers, it is time to close the conversation. I shall have you next bring on the field my groom or my gardener’s lad;—you would not range on an appreciably lower level if you did!”

“Papa!” remonstrated Stella.

“You and I, my dear Stella, do not agree in our tastes, I am sorry to say,” continued her father loftily. “You prefer matter to mind in all directions. Between your little friend Hortensia, with her delicate organization and pearly purity, and the coarse fibre of Mrs. Latrobe, you choose the latter; between this noble youth, this Admirable Crichton, Mr. Valentine Cowley, and that clod-like Mr. Randolph Mackenzie, with his companion clods the Pennefathers, you prefer these latter two. No; undoubtedly we

do not agree, my dear Stella, in our estimate of the best things in human nature; and I am sorry for it."

"That has nothing to do with my writing to Mr. Valentine Cowley," said Stella; "and," she added with strange rebelliousness; "I do not think I should be forced to do it when I do not like it."

"You are not forced; you do it because I wish it," said her father, suddenly setting his sails to the old tack.

"And you will not wish it if I so much dislike it?" said Stella, with as sudden a return to her old coaxing and caressing manner.

"For this once, oblige me," said her father, smoothing the hair from her forehead and kissing her gently—"for this once."

And poor Stella was conquered, as he knew she would be.

Valentine was by this time feverishly in love with Cyril's former fiancée. He knew the elementary rules about preparing the ground and sowing the seed before you can expect to garner; nevertheless, scientific knowledge did not supply practical wisdom, and he wanted his harvest before the grain had had time to ripen. Left to his own fancy, which was active, he thought himself more and more in love than he

had been even when in the presence of his Beautiful Lady, as he called her for his latest designation—and he made up his own mind without knowing whether Stella's would ever be brought into harmony therewith. She was his Supreme; and he intended to marry her. He felt sure of her father's consent; so sure, indeed, that had anything been able to throw him off his intention, it would have been Mr. Branscombe's too evident desire to call him son-in-law. The consent of his own parents was also a foregone conclusion; for the Branscombes were their own social equals all round; Stella herself was unexceptionable; and, what was more to the purpose perhaps, in their estimate of things, she would not come empty-handed. If he had chosen Georgie Pennefather he would not have been quite so sure of a home-welcome to his bride. The Pennefathers were also the Cowleys' equals so far as birth and social position went—but the girl herself! Mrs. Cowley was fastidious about the girls of her acquaintance, and the picture of a daughter-in-law who laughed and talked slang and rollicked, as Georgie and her twin Dove and all belonging to them laughed and talked and rollicked generally, made Valentine sometimes laugh and sometimes feel a little qualm—which was a very good substitute for remorse.

Meanwhile he was passionately and honourably in love with his equal in all things—his equal whom he intended to marry—his present ideal and Cyril Ponsonby's former lover—Stella Branscombe.

Stella was not actively ill, but she was on the verge of that state called generically "breaking down"; and Dr. Quigley made it his business to go as often to Rose Hill as he could find any excuse for a visit. He had of late found an excellent one, having dug out of the mining population a young fellow who had a talent for painting and whose sketches he brought to Mr. Branscombe, ostensibly for that gentleman's valuable criticism. In reality it was to be able to ask Stella this question about herself and to make that inquiry of Jane Durnsford; to be able to give those sharp prominent collarbones of hers a few ringing taps beneath his long lean fingers; every now and then to listen to her heart and lungs with the stethoscope to his large flat ear; to make sure that no vital mischief had as yet set in, and to make also sure that she was taking his medicine regularly, and, if not gaining good, yet staving off evil. He was pulling Augusta's child through with all his known skill and care, and he intended, when the little fellow should be well enough,

to send him and his mother to the seaside; and Stella should go with them. This was his design for the immediate future. Meanwhile and for the present he, like all the rest, held his breath.

Colonel Money Penny was perplexed. He could not tell what was false and what was true in that fair widow's conduct. It was odd if she had not seen that notice which his jealous eye devoured so greedily immediately after she had left. Yet would she have perpetrated such an unblushing falsehood as was this denial of hers, at least by implication if not by direct assertion? Yet again, if she had not seen it, what had changed her manner with such strange suddenness between his leaving the room and returning after so short an interval? It was an odd little thornbush, looked at all round. He could not see his way through it; and, as a gentleman, he was bound to accept her word that there was nothing to see. He intended to try his fate definitely when the boy was better. Until then he must wait, ponder, hope—was it hope?—and fight with his wild beast of jealousy, doubt and wounded pride, as well as he knew how.

On her side Mrs. Morshead was softened by this illness of the child to a degree that took her household by surprise. And she was out

of sorts herself. So far she admitted, but no more. She had a mysterious something amiss with her of which she never made confession. She rejected with scorn the proposition to "speak to Dr. Quigley," when she looked so ill and walked so feebly, and was evidently in so much suffering that both her daughter and her maid saw for themselves what she hid with so much care from all the world. She believed in him for that "poor fellow," her grandson, but for herself she despised him as she would despise any other quack or humbug. So Augusta need not give herself the trouble to ask her. She knew what she was about, and the least said the soonest mended, at all times.

She said this sharply enough; still, with less than her usual acrimony; for since the boy's illness she had been almost humane to her daughter—certainly, if not positively loving, yet negatively inoffensive, and even taking a little care not to add her usual tale of thongs and whips to the poor young widow's scorpions of anxiety.

The neighbourhood too, interested in the boy, came often to The Laurels; and this frequent influx of visitors a little diverted the lonely old woman. Colonel Money Penny came perhaps the most frequently. He never saw Augusta;

never once; but that perennial Hope of man kept up a steady flame of expectation on every occasion, and the terrible old woman had the good of the light.

In this universal attention paid to her for the sake of her daughter, the acrid humour of the mistress of The Laurels was somewhat sweetened and her bitter tongue had a certain respite. Even the Pennefathers got off with fewer rebukes than usual, and she scoffed with less malignant verve at Finery Fred and all his affectation. To Stella she was almost maternal and very nearly affectionate; and, now that no one said so and she was not bound by the law of her being to deny and contradict, she saw for herself how close the girl was to that one step which goes over the border of Time into the abyss of Eternity. She told Mr. Branscombe to his face, sharply and curtly as her manner was, that he was not fit to have the care of a nice girl like that. Any one with only half an eye, she said, not to speak of four—looking contemptuously at the pince-nez on that long, straight handsome nose—could see that poor dear Stella was next thing to gone; and it was a shame and a sin not to look after her better! What would her dear mother have said to see her neglected like this? Never a woman to

make sure that she was taken care of, to boil her up a comfortable posset at nights, or to see that she wore flannels next her skin and put her feet into hot water—it was a sin and a shame; and so she told him; and some of these fine days he would be sorry for it and wish that he had taken friendly advice when it was offered. But men were a poor lot, take them all round; and for her part she did not see what good they were in the world at all! They only rampaged about and put all things into confusion; and women had nothing else to do but attend to their humours, and see that they had their buttons sewn on and their shirt-fronts starched and ironed like so much glazed card-board—give them good dinners, and treat them like a parcel of overgrown school-boys, as they were. But not while she had a tongue in her head would she refrain from telling the truth—no, not if she had to die for it! And the truth was that Stella was looking downright dreadful, and in a very little while she would lose all her beauty if she went on like this; and then where would she be?

“Where she is now, my dear madam,” answered Mr. Branscombe grandly; “in her father’s home and heart.”

“Her father’s fiddlesticks,” snapped the

vulgar old creature crossly. "Better have given her to that young man when you were about it! She was fond of him; as she ought to have been, seeing that she was engaged to him and made fuss enough over him. A father's home and heart are not as good as a husband's to a nice girl like that; and it was downright cruelty to keep her back as you did, Mr. Branscombe! She has never been the same creature since. And any one but yourself could see that she is breaking her heart now!—any one. Ah, it takes a mother to learn these things!" she added, with unconscious contradiction, wishing to punish her adversary by this allusion to his good Matilda.

"Providence has denied her the continuance of the one parent, but I think I have somewhat successfully supplied the hiatus," said Mr. Branscombe with rigid stateliness.

"And I don't," said Mrs. Morshead snappishly.

"There, my dear madam, we must agree to differ," answered Stella's father with a superior smile. "You, on your part, doubtless think that you have successfully supplied the place of father to your daughter and to your little grandson. In like manner, I claim credence for the faithful and fit performance of my delegated duties. If we fail, you and I, we fail

in concert; and neither can say ‘le peché de mon voisin.’”

“God bless my heart and soul!” said Mrs. Morshead with satirical disdain. “Your language is beyond me,” she added. “I am only a plain, rough, everyday body and you are superfine and gilt-edged all over. You always make me think of musk and white-kid gloves; and I am sure you must live chiefly on butter and honey, you are so soft and silky.”

“I thank you for the compliment, Mrs. Morshead,” said Finery Fred smiling sweetly. “You have expressed to the letter the character I wish to have and the impression I hope and endeavour to make. Refinement and softness—what a flatterer, my dear madam, you are! Ah! who could ever call Mrs. Morshead rough?—not I for one!”

“Then I am sorry, Mr. Branscombe,” said Mrs. Morshead grimly. “I am proud of being called rough, for that means true; and if you call me soft I know that I have done and said something that I should not.”

“Ah, you are a wag, my dear madam, a wag!” said Mr. Branscombe airily. “You really are supreme good company! But I must tear myself away, else I should like to enjoy your pleasant society for hours longer. Au

revoir, chère madame ; à bientôt," he said, knowing that Mrs. Morshead hated French phrases as much as she hated flattery. And with this he bunched up his long white fingers into a knot and blew the old woman a gallant kiss, leaving her speechless with disgust and vexation.

CHAPTER V.

BY THE SEASIDE.

REALLY his daughter's health was getting to be almost as great a nuisance to Mr. Branscombe as her love-affair with Cyril Ponsonby! It broke in on the rhythm of his thoughts, interfered with his habits, disturbed his reflections and annoyed him all through. So that when Dr. Quigley told him, brusquely enough, to pack off his girl to the seaside with Mrs. Latrobe and her little boy, albeit Augusta's companionship was theoretically against his idea of fitness, he assented to the proposal, not only without demurrer but with a decided feeling of relief from a very real and pressing personal annoyance.

At one time it would have seemed impossible that Stella's father should have become thus painfully estranged from the Star of his House

—the smiling, dimpled object of his graceful paternal love—the sweet inspiration of his domestic muse. And at one time Stella would have thought it impossible that she should have left that dear papa and Rose Hill with a sense of escape from duress into freedom, from sickness into health, from falsehood and make-believe into reality and truth. But times had changed with both; and each knew the fact, if Stella had not enough moral hardihood to acknowledge all her share. Indeed, had she understood herself and read her father, she would have held her life to have come to an end for all its happiness and all its worth.

On his side however, Finery Fred had never lacked the courage which acknowledges things as they are and confesses when the loving have ceased to please and the beloved to be of value. There was no weak allowance with him of this fault or that folly, accepted with the rest, *quand même*. If his dearest failed, they failed; and if they were in his way they were, and must be removed. He believed in the value of mental repose for the artistic nature, and held that the poet's soul should never be vexed whatever happened. And as his work in life was the creation of beauty, so he said, all which told against that work must be eliminated from his

path, as you would remove logs and orange-peel from the track of a runner. And as Stella had, unfortunately for herself, proved of late an obstruction and a cause of vexation to his soul, he had the courage to say so when he took private counsel with himself and balanced incompleteness here with fulfilment there.

“She annoys me,” he said, as he sat, pen in hand, unable to write the “Song to the Sweet South Wind” (*Hortensia*) which had presented itself to him in the watches of the night—unable to “sing,” as he called it, because so full of his daughter’s ill-health, changed temper, want of proper affection for her incomparable little friend, evident fretting after that young clown pig-sticking out there in India, and felt if not expressed indifference to his own work. “She annoys me; and I should do better without her. She has changed since the rupture of her foolish engagement and has become morose and disagreeable. She does not respect my genius as she ought and at one time did; from a help she has become a hindrance. It is well that she leaves me for a while. The wheels will run more smoothly without her; and, if I can, I will remove her altogether!”

Pondering over chances and probabilities, and dreadfully out of humour with that once

radiant and now undeniably dingy Star, Mr. Branscombe sat down and composed one of his most elegant epistles for the benefit of Mr. Valentine Cowley. He began by telling his dear young friend, his Admirable Crichton, Himself Redivivus, that he was despoiling himself of his sweet child's invaluable companionship, and sending her to St. Ann's under the care of Mrs. Latrobe, who had obligingly offered to be her chaperon and caretaker. He hoped his dear love would not be dull. He himself would go to see her soon after her installation; and perhaps, he added significantly, other friends more suitable to her age than even a fond father would find themselves in her neighbourhood before long. It would be a favourable moment for reflection and deep-seated impression; and he trusted that his dear young friend would do what he could for his sweet child's solace and amusement while by the solemn shores of the sounding sea. He looked on them as brother and sister, he said, and only wished that heaven had sent him such a son for himself—such a brother for his daughter.

He made the letter specially long and friendly; for, in spite of her natural loyalty, Stella had kept her promise of reply to Valentine's last effusion only to the ear and in no wise to the

hope, and had written so curtly that in effect she need not have written at all. Wherefore Mr. Branscombe, irate on this point also against his Star, took the thing into his own hands, hoping that the warm light of a father's friendship might shed a ruddy glow over a daughter's frozen indifference. It was his design to keep Mr. Valentine Cowley on the stocks so long as was possible, and not to let him slip off into deep water if to be held by any chain or cable known to man. He wanted Stella to marry, and he intended that she should marry the heir of Greyhurst Manor. If there was power left in a father's will she should be the young man's wife before the year was out; and then he himself—Handsome Fred Branscombe—well; what of himself? Who knows what passed through his mind as he looked at his face in the glass, scanning every square inch of his skin with microscopic minuteness of observation, then drawing himself up smiling and saying half aloud: "Handsome Fred Branscombe still!"

Wherefore he wrote Mr. Valentine Cowley a letter, which was substantially an offer of Stella's hand and an assurance that his own would be accepted, and which held behind those more evident lines the filmy network of an undeclared resolve—cost what it might, a resolve that should find issue in fact.

How delightful it was at the seaside! St. Ann's, one of the loveliest places on the whole north-coast of England, never looked so lovely as now in the bright months of early spring, when the clouds were so tender and the clear vault of heaven against which they rested was as blue as the sky of Italy and as clear as that which flashes down on the glaciers of the Engadine—when the sweet wild-flowers dyed the cliffs and meadows golden and pink and silver by turns, and scented the green lanes with perfume that was as subtle as a spirit and as full of fragrant harmonies as a song—when the resinous larches of the inland woods caught the sunlight in their rose-red tassels to give back in odour what they received in colour—when the sea seemed younger and fresher, more vigorous and more vitalized than usual, answering to the renewed freshness and vitality of the earth.

It was like another and better state of existence to Stella to sit here amongst the rocks, either alone or with Augusta and her boy. Sheltered from the wind and turned full to the light of the beautiful sea, she dreamed herself in Italy; and was sure that not even the cliffs of Sorrento nor the sheltered bays of Capri could give more exquisite delight in mere

existence than that which she felt now on this North of England coast. The sense of peace which came upon her was as infinite as that of healing; and she felt as if part of the heavy burden of her sorrow were slipping from her as she forgot herself in the love of that Great Mother who holds all the gifts of peace and health in her benign hand. And what a charming companion Augusta was! The more she was known the nicer she proved herself to be. Friends the two had ever been, so far as a young girl and a married woman ten years her senior can be friends. But they grew nearer and nearer together in the sweet solitude, the near intimacy, of their present life; and it seemed to Stella as if the checked and troubled current of her affections had once more a dear and pleasant outfall, and that Augusta brought back to her something of the beloved mother whom she had lost and of the young lover whom she had renounced.

On the brink of becoming morbid as she was, Stella could not have found a more wholesome companion than Augusta Latrobe. Sympathetic in nature and soft in speech, the widow was essentially cheerful, strong, and above all things unromantic. She was the essence of common-sense wisdom warmed by kindness and spiced

with a genuine love of fun and pleasure. She was undoubtedly what people would call worldly; but she was not selfish nor inhuman. She thought that life held more than the simple affections — especially that affection between man and woman which goes by the name par excellence of love. It held for her ease of circumstance and solidity of social position, peace at home, and above all, duty such as she owed to her boy; and nothing seemed to her so foolish as useless regrets and meaningless sentimentality. Her favourite two axioms were: “Break or bear” for the first part, and “Life lies before and not behind us” for the second. When things had perforce to be borne, it was essential, she said, that they should be borne with the dignity of cheerfulness. And when a loss is eternal and irreparable, we must bury our sorrow deep in the shadow of the grave which lies behind us, and press forward with hope and courage to the future before us.

She had lived in the practice of these principles for herself, and she applied them now to Stella. Cyril Ponsonby was done with. That act of the girl's life drama was ended to all appearances for ever; the page was turned down; and Augusta Latrobe allowed no weak peering through the closed leaves, no vain

attempt to reconstruct the stage. The seal of fate was set; and of what use tears and sighs? What was done, was done. Now to the future, and what had to come; and the widow, like Mr. Branscombe, would, if she could, turn that future to the benefit of Mr. Valentine Cowley as the best portion that Stella could expect for her share.

It was at the breakfast-table one morning when the first loophole was opened, where the reasonable, calm-judging friend could lay her guns and whence she could take her aim. The letters were brought in; three—all in masculine handwriting—were for Stella. One was from her father, one from Randolph Mackenzie, the third was from Valentine Cowley. To Augusta came none at all.

"Upon my word, young lady," laughed the widow pleasantly; "you are, what those vulgar little Pennefather girls would call 'going the pace.' Three letters, all from gentlemen! Come, confess—from whom?"

"Papa," said Stella, taking up one and kissing the envelope. "Dear papa! This is from that good Randolph Mackenzie. I know his handwriting, but this is the first time he has written to me—I wonder about what"—a little anxiously, one might almost say with embar-

rassment. "And this," she said, tossing down the third with what was saved from being indifference only by displeasure; "this is from Valentine Cowley. How tiresome he is!"

"And why tiresome, *ma belle*? And why, if tiresome, do you write to him at all or allow him to write to you?—more especially after what I told you the other day, and what not only I but every one else can see? Why, Stella! where is your logic and reasonableness in all this, my dear?"

"It is not my fault," said Stella hastily. "I do not wish either to write to or hear from him. If I had my own way I would never see nor hear from him again. He worries me to death, Augusta; and I am not to blame."

"So? then by whose will is it? Mr. Cowley's or your father's, or both?"

"Papa's," answered Stella in a low voice.

She had to tell the truth if she said anything at all; and though she did not like making what seemed to her such a damaging statement against her father, still she was bound to do so; and it was a relief to explain the whole position to her friend.

"He makes you correspond with Mr. Cowley against your will?" asked Augusta.

"Yes," said Stella.

“And Mr. Cowley knows that it is against your will?”

“I try to make him feel it,” she answered with a little flash.

“But he perseveres?”

“Yes.”

“He writes often?”

“Yes; once a week always, and sometimes twice. I hate his letters! I cannot tell you how much I hate them!” said Stella with a petulant gesture, throwing half-across the table that which had just come in and which she had not opened.

“Has he made you an offer yet?” asked the widow in her matter-of-fact way, probing with that firm, direct, assured touch of surgeons who put you to torture and pretend that you scarcely feel.

“No!” said Stella with indignant energy.

“But he makes love in his letters? He does not write, I suppose, only about the colour of the clouds or the last new poem?”

“He makes a great many silly speeches,” answered Stella, with a curious mixture of annoyance and reluctance.

“And you could not possibly like him? You could not make up your mind to marry him?” asked Augusta, still serenely unconscious of

giving pain while she turned the knife with a steady hand and pushed the probe still deeper into the wound.

“Augusta! never! never! Marry Valentine Cowley? I would rather die first!” said Stella, with as much passion of denial as if she had been asked: Could she commit murder or plan a forgery?

“You might do worse. He is a nice young fellow. You might indeed do worse, my dear,” said Augusta.

“I am much obliged to you for your estimate, but I do not think I could do much worse!” said Stella, holding her head high and speaking in an offended tone.

Decidedly that dear girl’s temper had not improved of late! There was no danger now of her sweetness wearying by its uniformity—of the smooth and limpid serenity of the waters fatiguing the onlooker for want of the pleasant change of ripple and ruffle! She had developed of late quite a refreshing amount of irritability, in which her nature clothed itself as in a new dress with fresh appointments. And as it was that kind of irritability which is without bitterness and without personal application—which is due only to an uncomfortable state of the nerves and to a “run-down” condition of the health

in general—it did not seriously affront those to whom it was shown. She was distinctly cross at times ; but it was crossness which exhausted itself in a breath ; crossness which was born and then died in a moment and which did no one any real harm while it lasted.

Augusta smiled to herself at the girl's little “spurt.” It did not affect her the least in the world. What she had to say should be said, whether it made her companion cross or not. She had to have the thing out and do what she could to make oil and vinegar mix.

“Then, Stella, dear girl, if you feel all this, and are so set and determined, you should not write to him nor let him write to you,” said the widow, very quietly but very firmly. “It is scarcely fair to him and certainly not right to yourself.”

“But what can I do?—papa makes me,” said the girl, her irritability gone and self-reproach remaining. Her doctrine of filial obedience had not been lessened because her belief in paternal perfection was somewhat diminished. Her father's will still represented to her the most righteous obligation of her life ; and though she could not obey cheerfully in this matter of Valentine Cowley, nevertheless she did not disobey. Perhaps things would have been

better if she had been less conscientious and more self-willed.

“Your father evidently wishes you to marry Mr. Cowley,” then said Augusta, summing up the whole question. “And he does what he can to encourage the young man’s hopes. If you really do not intend to marry him, you would do better to disobey your father now than to disappoint him afterwards. You will do less harm; for, as things are, you are giving poor Valentine false hopes which will make your future refusal only the more severe. Take my advice, Stella—either break off this correspondence which is doing harm all round, or make up your mind to marry the young fellow when you are asked.”

“Do not say that, Augusta,” said Stella with a solemn kind of earnestness, a tone almost of menace in her voice.

“I tell you again that you might do worse,” repeated the widow dryly. “He is a nice young fellow on the whole; and Greyhurst Manor would be a most charming home for you.”

“Do not talk like that, Augusta! You are so sweet and good when you are your best self! I cannot bear to hear you so worldly! Do not be vexed with me. What would Greyhurst

Manor be to me if I did not love the man?—and how could I ever love Mr. Cowley?”

“And why not?”

“Augusta!” said Stella revolted.

“Greyhurst Manor would be a lovely home whatever the man,” continued Augusta, not noticing that interjection and pursuing her theme with her most provoking air of genial good sense, of heartless reasonableness. “And if you did not begin with all that tremendous amount of nonsense which some girls think necessary, you would end in the placid contentment which comes from habit, ease of position and mutual respect. And I assure you, Stella child, habit and respect and enough money for all your wants and a good social position and a nice house, and all that kind of thing, go farther to make a happy marriage than the romantic enthusiasm and blind adoration of the phantom which goes by the name of love. If you could bring yourself to marry Valentine Cowley you would be much happier than you are now, or perhaps ever will be. But if you cannot,” she went on to say, stopping Stella as she was about to speak; “at least do not let him believe that you will. Father or not, do not be induced to play with him now only to disappoint him in the end.”

“How impossible it is to do right!” said Stella with a quick sigh of impatience. “We are taught from our childhood to obey our parents as the first duty in life, for in obeying them we are obeying God—and when we are older, if we do as they tell us, we do wrong.”

“Because we always do wrong when we make a fetish for ourselves, which we worship beyond reason;” said Augusta. “The only safe guide in life is common sense; and that is the rarest of all. Not the finest virtue in the world—not the most necessary—can stand the strain of excess; and even obedience to parents can be carried to excess—as in this matter of yours with Valentine Cowley. So now, after this lecture let us go out. It is a sin to waste the sunshine.”

CHAPTER VI.

THE LOVER'S LEAP.

AT every seaside place, where there are cliffs and rocks worthy of the name, are sure to be found a Smuggler's Leap and a Smuggler's Cave, round which are gathered fierce traditions having still the power to stir the blood and rouse the imagination. Sometimes there is a Lover's Leap instead of the Smuggler's, where tragedy takes the place of romantic crime and the sympathy is all on the side of the sufferer. At St. Ann's there was of course the due amount of local interest and tradition; for the coast was wild and rock-bound; and in the old days of high duties and strict Protection it had been famous for the boldness of its law-breakers and the success with which their daring ventures had been made. Shreds and ends of fine Flanders lace were still among the

cottage heirlooms of the fisher folk ; here a louis d'or and there a Spanish doubloon was hung against the walls or laid in the bowl of the quaint Venetian vase with the twisted threads of white run through the stem ; and the odour of cognac and schiedam seemed to linger yet in the air. But all these stirring times were past now—put to death by the prosaic facts of free-trade and the coastguard ; and only memories and traditions remained of this bold Will Watch, or that more terrible Paul Jones—only here and there a blood-stained grave marked the last resting-place and crystallized the history of some wild desperado whom nature had designed for a hero and of whom fate had made a ruffian and fortune an outlaw. Still, all these memories and old-world stories gave a kind of historical point and meaning to places, which surrounded them with human interest and lifted them into the regions of poetry and romance.

The most beautiful of all these places at St. Ann's was the Lover's Leap ; and the story was as pathetic as the place was picturesque. It was the old, old story of loving not wisely but too well ; of parental cold-blooded denial and youthful hot-headed passion ; of love strong as death and greater than fear ; of the youth

who jumped into the sea from his pursuers and was saved; of the maid who flung herself in after him in despair, and was lost. And partly because she was love-lorn in her own life, and naturally therefore given to sentimental sympathies, and partly because the spot was so beautiful, Stella's favourite resting-place was on the rocks just below that fatal cliff whence the man had struck out to safety and the girl had sunk down to death.

“How true to life!” she thought sadly, as she sat there in front of the placid sea and under the shadow of the overhanging rocks. How true to her own history! Cyril had struck out into the smooth waters of indifference, where another love would save him; she had gone down like a stone under the black waves of despair whence she should never be rescued by living hand! How true to the difference between man and woman! she thought again, woman-like, heaping on the collective man all that bitterness of blame which is only the other side of individual love. Yes, the strong man struck out and was saved, and the weak woman, who loved him, went down and was lost.

So she sat, mournfully dreaming—her eyes shut as though she were sleeping; while Augusta and her boy, out there in the bright,

wholesome sunlight, slipped about among the seaweed and the rocks, looking for sea-anemones, catching the little baby crabs running distractedly through the tiny shallows left by the receded tide, and picking up the tropical shells which had been brought from the far-off regions of the sun by the strong north current to the shores of bonny Cumberland.

The child's happy voice and Augusta's cheerful tones came upon the girl's ear like echoes from another life as she lay there dreaming, with those melancholy visions of loneliness and despair, those sad thoughts of ruin and disappointment, grouped round her like shadowy spectres. But they roused her and made her ashamed of this slothful indulgence of unavailing sorrow. Selfish, silly, weak, contemptible—she called herself all sorts of hard names as she resolutely cleared her brain of these misleading mildewing spectres. She sat up with a strong stiff back, as a reasonable woman should—no longer lounging against the rocks sunk in that slothful reverie of speechless sadness. She took off her hat and let the wind raise and ruffle her pretty hair; passed her hands over her eyes as if clearing them from the lingering heaviness of sleep; opened the book in her hand and glanced at the page where

she had left off; looked out on the sea and watched Augusta and her boy—their figures dark against the shining waves and glittering sand; and again she felt the glad glow of young blood in her veins, the glory of life, and that all was not lost to her even though Cyril Ponsonby were parted from her for ever. There was love still left in the world; there was beauty; and there was always duty with work. No; all was not lost, though she should never be any man's wife, and never love again. Still, the present was good, and the future was not the hopeless wreck which but a few moments ago it had seemed to her to be. So, full of renewed courage and cheerfulness, she began again on her book, which was Julian Sturgis's delightful story of “An Accomplished Gentleman.” *

What a charming story it was! she thought; how easy in its style, how graceful and playful!—how it touched the surfaces of things with such a light and pleasant hand, and yet was not

* Just at this part of my story I read for the first time Mr. Sturgis's pleasant novel. I was painfully struck with a certain coincidence of character and idea in his Hugo Deane and my own Fred Branscombe; and I make this explanation here to save myself from the charge of plagiarism and to express my keen appreciation of the elder work.

shallow! Still, something in the story pained her. Something in the circumstances, not in the character—no, certainly not in the character—of Hugo Deane reminded her so horribly of her own dear father! It was like a bad caricature, where the resemblance is undeniable but where the likeness is detestable. She hated herself that such a thing should come to her; but she could not chase it entirely away, though she banished it to the background of a mere uneasy consciousness. Her dear papa like Hugo Deane? Certainly not! The one was true, the other false—the one a genius and the other only a sham; and it was sacrilege to connect the two together. So, resolutely refusing to acknowledge the likeness which her consciousness could not deny, she went on reading as if her whole life's interest were concentrated in the tale.

Suddenly a man's hasty step on the shingle made her look up, when, to her infinite dismay, she saw the tall, handsome figure of Valentine Cowley striding over the loose stones and rubble towards her. A letter, still unopened, from him this morning, and now he himself at noon! What did it mean? and why had he come?

He came up to her and held out his hand, as with the other he took off his hat and stood

bareheaded in the sun. What a happy smile on his fine face matched the living light of that lustrous sun! Really it was a fine face, if not a beloved one. Even Stella, though she did not love it, was forced to confess its beauty. His lithe young figure looked instinct with life and strength, with the daring of his youth, the confident satisfaction of his present place and future certainties. He was of the kind to whom life and the land belong by nature and inheritance; of the kind consecrated by fate to take boldly what he meant to hold firmly.

As her hand lay in his he drew a breath that was like a joyous interjection.

“I thought I should find you down here!” he said, laughing with simple happiness. This sudden straight discovery was like a good omen. “Had I not a fine instinct?” he asked. “They told me that you had gone down to the sea-shore, and I came here straight as a bird flies—made a bee-line and fell upon you as if I had known already.”

Stella’s face stiffened, paled, grew as prim as if she were Hortensia in spirit and herself only in form.

“How do you do, Mr. Cowley?” she said coldly, pulling away her hand from his and neither expressing surprise nor offering welcome.

"Did you not expect me?" he asked, his spirits dropping to zero.

"No," she answered with the finest little accent of disdain, as if the question were in itself an impertinence. Why should she have expected him? Why thought of him at all?

"Did you not receive my letter?" he asked again. "I told you that I was coming to-day. Have you not had a letter from me this morning? You ought. It was posted in right time."

Stella looked a little confused.

"Yes, there was a letter from you," she said.

"But I told you that I was coming!" persisted Val.

"I have not read it yet," said Stella in a tone of studied indifference.

Valentine's fair face flushed with sudden anger. The slight implied in her words and emphasized by her manner, hit him hard; and even a man in love is susceptible to what he must call an impertinence, though it comes from the beloved. The difference between this and a like offence from another lies in the ease with which he forgives, and the odd transformation of anger into humility and offended dignity into abject entreaty.

"I am sorry you find my letters of so little

interest that you do not care even to read them,” he said.

“I do not think I ever gave you reason to believe that they did interest me so very much!” said Stella in her most unpleasant voice and manner.

“Pray give me back my morning’s unfortunate epistle—the letter that you have not cared even to open—and let me destroy it,” said Val, the flush still on his face and his voice studiously cold and haughty.

“I have not got it with me,” said Stella, cold and haughty without study. “I left it on the breakfast table ; but you are welcome to destroy it when we go back to the house.”

“Stella !” cried Val impulsively.

“Mr. Cowley !” returned Stella, indignant at the familiarity of the address.

“I expected a different reception from this I must confess,” said Val, his mood melting and his anger changing, as it was certain to do, from wrath to sorrow. “I did not think you would receive me so coldly, so cruelly. I expected some kind of welcome from you.”

“Why should you ?” answered Stella quickly. “I never let you suppose that I would welcome you if you came here, Mr. Cowley ;—quite the contrary.”

"Your father told me he would be glad if I came, and that you would be glad too," said Valentine.

"You are papa's friend and he likes you," answered Stella stiffly. "Papa spoke as he felt for himself; but even he has no right to speak for me."

This was a tremendous bit of self-assertion on the part of the girl who had been born and bred in the faith of filial submission; but the exigencies of the moment were strong, and she must assert herself if she would not be swamped in the heavy wash where she found herself.

"Then I am not your friend?" said Val sorely.

"You are an acquaintance," said Stella, a little less coldly than before. She hated to give pain even when it was as necessary as now. "I have no young men friends—except Randolph Mackenzie," she added. "I am not the kind of girl to have them."

"But girls do not keep up a correspondence with acquaintances—only acquaintances," said Val with an imprudent accent of reproach in his voice to match the reproach in his heart.

Stella's eyes, usually so mild and of late so mournful, flashed at this with a sudden blaze of indignation.

"I was forced to write to you," she said proudly. "Papa wished it. I do not know why, but he did; and I wrote to please him, because he made me, and not of my own free will."

"I am sorry that you have been forced into anything so unpleasant against your will," said Valentine Cowley, the touchwood of his pride again taking fire. But the fire was not long-lived, and when he turned away his head something moved over his eyes that felt like tears.

The girl's soft heart smote her. She did not like to see this tall, fine, strong fellow so suddenly humiliated, so strangely cast down and softened. She felt that he had, or thought he had, the right to reproach her as he liked. Had not Augusta said so? It was no business of his that her father had forced her to write against her will. He had only to do with the fact that she had written, not once, but often. And though her letters were purposely made the deadest, the most soulless, the coldest, the most uninteresting things in the world; still they were letters; and he was a young man while she was a girl.

"I said just now that I was not the kind of girl to have young men friends; and I am still less the kind to keep up a correspondence

with one of my own accord," said Stella, a little less icily than before.

He recognized the partial thaw in her voice.

"But you made an exception in my favour; and will again?" he asked eagerly.

She looked up into his face then down on to the sand.

"No," she said; "I told papa before I left home that I would not write to you any more."

"I will try to change that negative into an affirmative. Some day it will come!" said Valentine confidently, hoping all things and believing as much as he hoped because her voice was softer and her eyes looked down in pity, not up in defiance. All the hopes of love are built out of these small splinters. Not the finest Roman mosaic is composed of such minute pieces; not the ultimate atom itself is more microscopic, more intangible, than the shadowy nothings which go to create that gigantic and omnipotent Love who rules the world and makes of man the equal of the gods or the sport of the demons!

"No, do not try, you cannot change it," said Stella, just as Augusta and her boy came to them, laden with slimy treasures and strong smelling "finds" of all sorts and descriptions.

"When did you come?" cried the widow

in her genial way, glancing with a half-amused, half-anxious air to Stella as if to see how she bore herself and what effect the sudden advent of her father's Admirable Crichton had had on her.

"Just now," said Valentine.

"It is quite a surprise," said Augusta. "Why did you not give us notice?"

"I did," returned Valentine, heroically conquering his pride and swallowing his mortification. "If Miss Branscombe had done me the honour of reading my letter she would have found that I intended to be here by the ten-forty train this morning!"

"Oh, that naughty, lazy girl!" cried Augusta pleasantly. "People should always read their letters as soon as they arrive. I believe it was Lord Palmerston who said all letters answered themselves if left long enough; but that is not my way."

"I wish you would make your way your friend's," said Valentine, with a rueful look to where Stella was strolling away among the rocks with the boy.

The little fellow could never have enough of anemones and long green slimy ribbons, and thought the dirt and drip of the seaside the most enjoyable part of the business.

“And I wish,” added Val significantly, “that you would stand my friend, Mrs. Latrobe.”

“I do ; I am your friend,” answered Augusta also significantly. “I want to see Stella well married. She would be so much happier and better in every way than she is now, with only that dreadful father of hers to be her companion ! But, frankly, for all her soft manners and sweet-tempered acquiescence in little things, she is exceedingly difficult to influence in graver matters.”

“Time works wonders ; and constant dropping wears away even granite. And she is not granite !” laughed Valentine, with a sudden flush of confidence.

“But sometimes time only confirms,” said the widow, in her character of Justice, holding the balance even, and weighing chances as well as merits.

The tide had turned and was now coming in. Stella and the boy had gone far away to the very border of the waves. It was such fun to run forward a few steps, as if to defy that incoming crest, and then to scamper back as fast as those small feet could run to prevent being overtaken by the water ! And as Stella was essentially good-natured and easy to live

with, she let the child enjoy himself in his own way, glad for her own part to be rid of poor Valentine Cowley and his less than welcome attentions.

As they were standing on the firm yellow sand, playing with the incoming tide, they were being surrounded in that strange insidious way which characterizes certain sea-coasts. Silently and rapidly they were being cut off from the mainland, and soon were standing on a little island which every moment became smaller, while every moment the barrier of intervening waters became wider and deeper. There was as yet no kind of danger to life. It was just an unpleasant little adventure which carried with it wet feet and a pair of hopelessly ruined boots. But when Val and Augusta made out the situation of which Stella, for want of looking behind her, was entirely ignorant, they rushed over the sands at full speed,—Augusta calling to her boy and Val shouting to Stella.

"Stay where you are, Mrs. Latrobe," then said Valentine. "I will get them through. There is no danger—don't alarm yourself."

Stella turned at their voices, to find herself with the boy on a mere islet of sand with the waters all round her, and Valentine Cowley

dashing through, over his ankles, even now, while the tide poured in and spread onward almost as swiftly as a fleet horse could gallop.

"Don't move till I come to you!" said Valentine, grateful to Providence for the chance.

How well he looked as he came on in the sunshine, splashing through the rapidly rising water! It was the kind of action which becomes a man and puts him in good humour with himself, conscious as he is that he shows well and makes a large display at a little cost. Val knew that he looked handsome and brave and strong and helpful as he went striding through the rising waters to where the girl whom he loved, and the child of whom she had undertaken the care, were standing. He knew that he showed well, and that he was laying the foundations for future gratitude. He had never been so finely posed as now; and he intended to make the best of the situation.

"I am so sorry," said Stella in a humiliated voice, feeling how the tables were turned, not in her favour. "I don't know how I came to be so stupid and neglectful."

"You did not look round," said Valentine with what he meant to be a soothing concession to her wounded pride. "Now you must let me carry you through. There is no real danger at

this moment, but there will be if you are not quick. Here, you young powder-monkey, do you hold fast up aloft,” he continued, with a reminiscence of the Pennefather manner in his voice and action, as he snatched up the boy and set him astride on his shoulders. Then, without losing time in compliment or argument, choosing not to hear Stella’s declaration that she would walk through on her own feet and despise the wetting that would follow, he took her bodily in his strong young arms; and in this way carried both her and the child in safety through the waters. It was all done easily and quickly; for the young fellow was muscular and well-trained in athletics; and it had the air if not the reality of saving life at his own risk—an air of which, as has been said, he intended to make the most for future use. If he had not been in love and repulsed, he would have been the first to laugh at the whole matter as not worth thanks of any kind. As things were he was not sorry to be able to pose for a hero; albeit the dangers encountered had been no more formidable than if a white mouse had set its teeth at him. Tendrils, weak and soft, help to support the heavily-laden vine; and Val’s love could not afford to despise the most insignificant little aid.

So they walked back to the inn, the young man dripping from his knees downwards and carrying his handsome head like a hero—Augusta his friend and brother for life, seeing that he had preserved her little boy from what might have been indeed dangerous to him—Stella, ashamed and annoyed with herself, her heart set against gratitude and her conscience pulling her towards thankfulness, in a most uncomfortable and distracted state of mind altogether, and with that feeling of slipping down the incline, so terrible to her, yet which Augusta had found anything but terrible not so long ago. Still, as she was the only unhappy one of the little group, the greatest happiness of the greatest number carried the day.

As they went, Valentine Cowley, too content with life as it was and too certain of himself and hopeful of results to make love in any overt way—rather letting fate and fortune make love for him—turned to Augusta, and not thinking he was touching tender places said in a light and airy way :

“Who do you think came in the same train with me from Grange this morning? Mr. Kemp!—with the prettiest woman you can imagine—one of those fragile, slender, delicate creatures who look made up of clouds and

moonbeams, with a pair of soft, brown eyes that went half over her face and the sweetest voice I ever heard. One of the sweetest," he added, correcting himself; for her melodious voice was one of Stella's "points." "He seemed awfully wrapped up in her, I must say," Val continued with the same blundering ignorance of depths. "And I don't wonder at it; she was so awfully pretty and awfully good style."

"Indeed!" said Augusta, with a hard little laugh and her fair face suddenly aflame. "All Highwood seems to have gathered to St. Ann's."

"By Jove, talk of the —— Here he is!" cried Valentine, as Sandro Kemp, carrying a shawl, a camp-stool, a white umbrella, an olive-wood folding-footstool, an artist's portfolio, and bearing on his arm a tall, graceful, diaphanous-looking woman, came out of the hotel door just as Augusta and the others drew up, and thus met the little party face to face.

CHAPTER VII.

COUSIN ETHEL.

SANDRO'S first impulse was to make a movement of glad surprise towards that fair, false, morally perjured woman—his first mental process was a swift suppression of all the pain and wrath which had possessed him since those cruel words of undeserved insult, that heartless abandonment of their pleasant friendship. His next was a return to his now normal attitude of wounded pride and outraged affection, and that bitter assumption of indifference by which we attempt to master our pain, and by which instead of concealing it we show it.

As coldly as if this were nothing but a chance meeting between two mere acquaintances, Sandro Kemp lifted his soft felt hat to Augusta and her party. He would have passed on with the pretty woman and all her belongings on his

arm, had not Tony rushed at him, after the manner of a child who knows nothing of the meaning of things, and who would not hesitate to make mud-pies out of Mecca clay, nor to take cockshies at sacred symbols.

“Oh, Mr. Kemp, where have you been away to?” he said, jumping about him like a little dog. “I have been ill; and grandmamma gave me some jelly one night in a spoon; and Shah killed a robin redbreast in the snow; and the river was frozen—that bit where you made mamma cry,” he added with a suddenly serious face.

Doubt as to the propriety of his own joy at this unexpected meeting with one who had dealt so evilly by mamma came visibly into his clear eyes, his drawn mouth; but his mother smiled at him and then at their friend in an amiable and inane way; and her smile reassured the child.

“Why, Tony, do you remember me, little man?” said Sandro, flushing with pleasure.

He looked from the child to the mother—from the eloquent little face, bright and beaming, to that vague mask of inane amiability.

“It would have been odd if he had forgotten you,” said Augusta, with perfect tranquillity of voice and manner and a very audacity of

forgetfulness, such as the French would have characterized as sublime.

But then this was essentially Augusta's way. When she chose she could make herself like a smooth palimpsest newly prepared for fresh inscriptions and with all the old lettering seemingly obliterated for ever. To see and hear her at these times no one 'could believe that anything had ever gone before—that the history of a life lay hidden beneath the waxen surface, the blank serenity, of the moment. As now; no one could have imagined by her manner that a thought had ever connected her future with Sandro Kemp—that a tear had ever come into her eyes because of the pain of renunciation—that the strong wing of passion had ever swept over her as she stood midway, halting for a moment, between duty and inclination—that the darkness of despair had ever fallen about her like a cloud because of the cruelty of fate which denied what she desired. She met him as if they had parted yesterday, and as if nothing had ever been between them more than a dance, a flower, a merry jest, a careless laugh. Not the keenest onlooker could discern the faintest shadow of feeling in her face, of embarrassment in her manner. Not even Stella, who knew something, could divine more;

while Sandro himself felt bewildered, and as if he had somehow lost his way. He was like a man who, wandering among pathless crags and over arid wastes, suddenly finds himself at home, brought thither, as it seems to him, by some act of enchantment as inexplicable as delightful. Had he been a coward? or what did it all mean? Was she playing with him now? or had she been compelled to wound him then?

"You have been away such a long time, Mr. Kemp, it is quite delightful to see you again!" then said Stella, as her contribution to the odd if pleasant confusion of the moment.

Her voice and manner were kind to exaggeration; for she wanted not only to stand as shield-bearer to Augusta, but to administer that kind of cold douche to poor Valentine which consists in showing extreme warmth to one who is confessedly indifferent, in contrast to the chill reserve just shown another who is confessedly making efforts to win favour. It is the "high light" by which the whole picture takes its tone and receives its key.

Sandro turned to her with a smile. Here at least was no deception. Stella Branscombe had no reason to mislead him. What she said was all sincere, true, hearty; and her kindness

might be accepted as confidingly as it was offered generously. It was the common judgment of the world such as it is—that judgment which each man believes so infallible when he forms it!

The tall, graceful, diaphanous kind of woman, who as Valentine had said, seemed to be made up of clouds and moonbeams, opened her big eyes and looked at Stella with frank surprise. How odd this flattering manner from a girl to a gentleman! she thought. In her own life she was accustomed to have men about her as her slaves, not to make herself their incense-bearer! But here was a girl who said to an unmarried man how delightful it was to see him again, and how long it was since they had met, in a voice which seemed equivalent to a caress—which was tantamount to flinging herself at his head! What wretched style! What miserable manners! That elder woman was a little better. There was none of this milkmaid exuberance about her; but really if this girl intended to go on as she had begun, this sojourn at St. Ann's, so necessary for health and strength, would be immensely unpleasant.

While Sandro's companion had been thinking all this in her own mind, Augusta had been taking mental stock of her. Who was she, this

tall, eminently graceful and poetic-looking person? She was very beautiful; but it was a pity that she made up so much. She was not quite in her first youth, but beneath her veil, thanks to powder and paint, to antimony round her eyes and to artful touches everywhere, she seemed to have the colouring of sixteen; and her figure, of that slender and sinuous kind which retains its early forms far into the other half of maturity, helped the general delusion. She was dressed in the extreme of the prevailing fashion. Her gown was as if moulded on her like a second skin, and her skirts were tied back with so much vigour that she could only walk by plaiting her feet one before the other. Her hat was a marvel of picturesque assimilation; and beneath the feathers, which seemed almost part of her head-gear as nature had made it, her gold-coloured hair shone in the sun like a much-frizzed nimbus—owing the chief part of its glory to auricomus fluid and soda washes. Her small feet were shod in coquettish boots mounted on narrow heels like miniature stilts; her six-buttoned gloves were of the palest grey; and the bracelets, multitudinous bangles, broad dog-collar, earrings and brooch, with which she was in a sense armoured, were of the finest kind of Indian

jewellery. Her face was delicately modelled; her style went to simulate more fragility of health than was true; and she had the air of one accustomed to command, accustomed to be ministered to, and, beyond all things, used to the homage and admiration of men. And again Augusta wondered how Sandro Kemp, of all men, had come into toils like these, and how he—the lover par excellence of truth and simplicity—should be standing there with this graceful piece of elegant make-up leaning as it seemed to her triumphantly on his arm.

Suddenly the artist seemed to remember his companion and their joint position.

“Ethel,” he said to her very courteously; “let me introduce you to Mrs. Latrobe and Miss Branscombe.” To Augusta he said, as if with emphasis: “My cousin, Mrs. White.” Then he looked at Stella. “Mrs. White has just come from India,” he said smiling. “I believe she knows some friends of ours out there—Mr. Cyril Ponsonby.”

It was now Stella’s turn to feel the ground unsteady beneath her tread. Here before her stood the cause of some, if not of all, her sufferings—that Mrs. White to whom the Pennefathers had said her own true Love had turned the once sacred current of his affections!

This woman, painted, artificial, made-up and dangerous—the cause for which she, Stella, had been banished so effectually from his life—was now looking into her face, bowing, smiling, speaking as any other might have done!

"I have heard of Miss Branscombe," said Mrs. White in a sweet flute-like voice, with a pretty little catch that just escaped being a lisp.

Stella made a slight movement with her head. Had her life depended on it she could not have spoken.

"I used to see a good deal of Mr. Ponsonby," Mrs. White went on to say in her soft way. "We got to be quite friends. He is such a pleasant person; and my husband liked him so much."

"We heard of your kindness to him," said Augusta, coming to Stella's rescue, as just now Stella had come to hers by emphasizing her greeting to Sandro Kemp.

"Oh! I cannot speak about kindness," said Mrs. White with a tender kind of smile. "In India we are all kind to each other. We are like one family, you know, and have less stiffness than you in this cold England of yours."

She was an Englishwoman herself, but part

of the furniture of her personality was the affectation of foreign ways and corresponding strangeness to all belonging to the old home. She even spoke with a certain broken-backed little accent, as if her native tongue had been learned abroad—making her vowels very open, pronouncing her small words with punctilious breadth, and giving each syllable with commendable distinctness.

“He is a very nice fellow,” said Augusta with vague amiability; and Ethel White, looking at Stella, smiled again and said: “Very,” as the echo.

All this time Valentine had been standing essentially shut out from the rest. He had not been introduced to the graceful woman of whose advent he had been the herald; and for the moment he was effaced. Wet from the knees downward and set aside, he was conscious of appearing ridiculous for the one part, and of playing a very humiliating chord on the second fiddle for the other. He was sore at heart, wounded in his pride, and furious against that vague mischance, that shadowy foe, called Fate. Was there ever such an unlucky coincidence!—just when he had founded such an undeniable claim to Stella’s gratitude, and put their relations on so much better a footing—built up

such a pleasant little temple where Love was at once the architect and the enclosed god—to have everything blown about his ears by this inopportune meeting!

He stood there, his blood boiling as the name of Cyril Ponsonby was bandied about from one to the other. He saw how pale Stella had become when the name of her reported rival had been uttered, and how her eyes had suddenly filled with memories of her old Love as patently shown as if pictures had been painted on the dilated pupils—as if words had been printed on the darkened iris. It was too hard a trial for his philosophy to bear with equanimity. He was not disposed at any time to bear trials with equanimity, more especially those which touched his young man's pride; and now the fever of his wrath burnt like fire in his veins, and expressed itself on his face and bearing as plainly as those memories of Cyril had written themselves in Stella's eyes.

But he was not going to give up his hope, to abandon the field. He would wrestle with the shadowy rival, this haunting memory, as Jacob wrestled with the angel. And perhaps he would overthrow him. The Kingdom of Heaven is won by much seeking; and Val was pertinacious when he had made up his mind

and until that mind changed of itself, as it was apt to do. The very difficulties in his way made the struggle more enthralling and the hope of attainment all the sweeter; and—"les absents ont toujours tort." He was present, and Cyril was hundreds of miles away. He could perform gallant actions which stood out firm and solid as triumphant facts, while his rival lived only in the misty atmosphere of memory. On the whole his place might have been more untenable than it was; and he thought he saw daylight.

Tired of being thus effaced, thinking that Sandro had behaved with impertinent neglect in not introducing him to his cousin and feeling very uncomfortable about those well-shaped lower limbs of his, Valentine turned to Augusta with his off-hand, easy air.

"I think I will go in now, Mrs. Latrobe," he said. "I am rather dilapidated, and must put myself into dry clothes."

A deep colour came into his fair, handsome face, as he looked down on his stained and dripping garments, not sorry to recall to Stella's mind his heroic deed of half an hour ago, and thinking it hard to have got wet, spoiled his get-up, and then to be shunted as he had been.

"Yes, do. Indeed you should have gone

before," said Augusta eagerly. "What a thoughtless thing to do, standing there so wet as you are! We shall have you down with rheumatic fever next."

"Do go in and change, Mr. Cowley," said Stella, humanity overcoming repugnance. "We should not have let you stand here in this state."

Valentine looked radiant as Stella spoke. It was a little recompense that she should publicly show so much interest in him—a little balm to his wounded pride that she should give him tender counsel before Cyril Ponsonby's intimate friend—and his face brightened as if the sun had passed over it.

That sudden brightness gave a tolerably correct map of the country to pretty Mrs. White. In all that related to love affairs and the whole art and mystery of flirtation, she had the vision of a hawk behind those large lustrous eyes of hers. Mrs. Morshead herself was not more an adept in the science of building up an entire temple out of one brick, of constructing a full-fledged creature out of one bone, than was Ethel White, Sandro's cousin from India. Here before her was a brick—at her feet a bone; and she made the most of both.

“Where shall you be in half an hour’s time, Mrs. Latrobe?” then asked Valentine.

“At home; in the prosaic act of dining,” said Augusta with a smile. “We have to dine early on account of the boy; and really tea with shrimps and marmalade is not so bad. And you?”

“I shall join you when you have finished dinner, if you will allow me,” said Valentine, purposely not looking at Stella.

Stella did look at Augusta, and her eyes prayed her to say “No.” But Augusta had her own idea of things; and when she had an idea she generally kept to it pretty closely. She liked Valentine Cowley; and she too believed in the value of pertinacity, the force of presence, and the disintegrating influence of absence.

“Yes, do come,” she said genially. “It is such a delightful day, we might make a little excursion this afternoon. It would be pleasant if you came with us.”

“Most happy. That will do well,” said Valentine. “At what time?”

“Three,” said Augusta. “So now go in and get rid of your wet clothes.”

Ethel White looked at Sandro.

“It would be very nice for us to go some-

where too this afternoon," she said in her pretty graceful way, showing an evident desire to coalesce with Augusta and her party. "Do you think we could, cousin Sandro?"

"Certainly; nothing is easier if you would like it," he answered.

"Shall we join in one party?" then said Ethel, addressing Augusta as easily and amiably as if they had been friends for a generation.

Perhaps this was part of that frank hospitality, that œcumenical friendliness, for which Anglo-Indians are famous. Certainly the proposal seemed to come quite naturally, without design, premeditation or hidden meaning of any kind. It would be pleasanter to go in a body than in two scattered and meagre detachments; and, being pleasant, Sandro's cousin said so, and offered that sudden coalescence as the most natural thing in the world. The faint pink tinge for which she was famous came into the widow's fair face. She put on her waxen mask, smiled with inane amiability and looked perseveringly at Stella.

"It will be very pleasant," she said with an affected little drawl. "What do you say, Stella?"

"Yes; it will be very pleasant," echoed

Stella, divided between her instinctive shrinking from Mrs. White, Cyril's favourite friend, and her desire to be separated by "people" from Valentine Cowley.

And Valentine himself, though he detested the proposition, could scarcely negative the decision of the others.

Sandro Kemp did not speak. He simply turned his grave, kind eyes on Augusta, a little wonder, a little speculation and more sorrow, more inquiry in them than he himself knew of. But the engagement held good; and at three the break came round and they all went off together.

They had a charming drive. The country was beautiful; the old castle which they went to see was interesting; the day was perfect; and no accident of any kind happened to mar the enjoyment which each was supposed to feel. They all kept very close together; and every one but Val and Tony seemed determined to resist all attempts at separation from the main body, and to resolutely decline that dangerous "*solitude à deux*" which more than one had reason to fear and from which no one had great cause to hope. Sandro was naturally his cousin's bodyguard; and to be Ethel White's bodyguard was no sinecure and left but little

margin of freedom for aught else. Stella clung to Augusta as if her very life depended on keeping tight hold of that firm round arm. She was not to be tempted away by all Val's invitations to mount this bit of broken wall for the sake of the view—to come with him to that angle of the ruined court for the sake of architectural effects. She clung to Augusta like a child; and like a child Augusta took care of her. For her own part, the fair widow talked amiably to Ethel White; and Sandro kept silence. The Pennefathers would have called him as dull as old boots, but Augusta did not. For once or twice their eyes met; and when they did, it was to her as if his had audibly asked her a question, to which she took care to make no reply. So the afternoon passed and with the evening they all came home. But nothing had been done to advance the various dramas holding the stage save the introduction into the circle of Ethel White, Cyril's chosen friend in India and Sandro Kemp's favourite cousin, and the easy manner in which she had established herself as an old friend among them all.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE CRIMSON BARS OF EVENING.

To a married woman living in India, a train of admirers comes as naturally as a train of servants. Why should she not be adored? It does the dear boys good to come about her bungalow like so many tame rabbits; and it keeps them straight to have a friend like herself, maternal and admonitory if she be their junior and exceptionally pretty—their frank playfellow and younger sister if older than they and only comely or maybe commonplace. And if it does them good it does her no harm, and it makes her husband a little more on the alert, a little more careful to keep what he has got, than English husbands are in general. Without question, a train of adorers is a very pleasant addition to the social appanage of a young wife in India; and to do her justice she

seldom stints herself in the strength of her following.

But what comes so naturally to her and the dear boys who crowd round her in the compound and run in and out her bungalow like so many tame rabbits on the hunt for parsley, is a state of things quite foreign to the life at home. It takes a certain education before a young Englishman of ordinarily healthy morality and ordinarily honourable training can bring himself to make love to a married woman, whether her husband be his friend or no. And it soon became evident to Ethel White that no happy hunting-grounds were open to her here, and that she must be content to feel herself distanced by Stella, and shut out all round. This handsome young fellow, this Valentine Cowley, did not attempt to take up the glove thrown down by her expressive eyes. Neither during that drive, nor after it, did he advance one step towards that mental condition which the Doves were wont to localize under the name of "Spooney Green." He had eyes only for Stella, and the attentions which he paid to her, Ethel White, were of the coldest and most perfunctory kind. How different from the devotion which she was accustomed to receive in that much-abused land of punkahs and rupees!

There she was supreme; here she was nobody—distanced by a little country girl without style or furniture, and who had already a lien on another!

Really this sojourn at St. Ann's threatened to be horribly slow. Ethel wished now that she had remained with her husband's stiff old aunt, instead of breaking loose after a week's stay and one fit of hysterics. She would not have been duller there than it was evident she would be here; and she would have pleased her husband and won golden opinions from his very stupid family—which was always something gained. Now, subordinate to Stella Branscombe with this handsome Mr. Cowley; knowing that there had been an affair between her and Cyril Ponsonby on whom she had expended a large amount of useless powder and shot; and her cousin Sandro somewhat odd in his manner to this Mrs. Latrobe—who yet was nice enough in her own way—it all was really too horrid; and no wonder she did not like it.

Her secret dissatisfaction however, showed itself only in increased friendship to the women and more and more delightfulness of gracious queenhood to the men—in taking her place among them all, as if born into it and coming now frankly into her inheritance—and in

practically assuming the headship of everything and making every one subservient to her will, while professing only sweet submission to the vote of the majority. It was only her wretched health, her stupid weakness which was in the way at times. She was so sorry; but she could not help it, could she? And how she envied the great strong robustness of both Mrs. Latrobe and Miss Branscombe! If only she could be as strong!

Her manner all through was perfect. Indeed, she was famous for her manner throughout the Presidency. She had never yet met the man—save Cyril Ponsonby—whom she did not make her slave;—and even Cyril was in some sense her slave, though not exactly after the pattern that she had designed. And she had never met the woman whom she had failed to secure as an active friend or an innocuous neutral. She was irresistible; and she knew it; the finest flower of the finest lily-root of woman grown by this nineteenth-century civilization. Besides all this grace and dignity combined, she was extremely strict in her views on morality and social ethics; unimpeachable on the score of orthodoxy and ritual; and her naïve admiration for her husband was only equalled by the philosophy with which she bore their separa-

tions—which were frequent. She spoke very much against women who laced tight, flirted in public, were suspected of rouge and did not live happily with their husbands. Hence, she was eminently safe both as a maternal friend for young men and as a sisterly companion for girls.

The first day of the cousins' arrival passed without other incident than this coalescence of forces in the drive—this odd clinging together like so many swarming bees, when at the castle. Neither Augusta nor Stella “showed” in the later evening; and Valentine mooned among the rocks alone and wondered what his best plan really was—whether he should make Stella a plain, straightforward offer as things stood, or work away a little longer at that sapping and mining which he fondly hoped would prove successful in the end. When Ethel and Sandro went out for that evening stroll on the sands which comes in as part of the seaside duties, they saw the young fellow standing against the sunset sky, looking very lonely, very handsome, very much as if he would be the better for a nice little talk with a pretty woman who understood the art of judicious stirring up. But he did not accept the chance. With one quick look to make sure that Stella was nowhere

pinned to the diaphanous woman's graceful skirts, he lifted his hat and let the cousins pass on, while he continued to stare at the sands and the sky in alternate fluctuations of imbecile despair and irrational anger. He was very much disappointed and very much disgusted; and he did not care a straw for the challenge flung down by the big eyes of this diaphanous-looking woman. He cared only for Stella Branscombe—only for her! And, wanting her, neither youth nor health, neither the present nor the future counted.

“What a rude young man that Valentine Cowley is!” said Ethel pettishly, breaking into the midst of her cousin Sandro's artistic raptures about the sunset.

“Val Cowley? Oh, he is well enough!” said Sandro kindly.

“Cousin Sandro, you are a great goose,” said Ethel with charming insolence. “You never did understand anything, except your paint-box; and you never will. You are just a child.”

“I am sorry, dear,” he began penitently.

“What is the use of being sorry?” she interrupted crossly. “That does not make you any wiser. What is the good for instance of all this rubbish about the sunset, when I am cold and

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tired? All that you say is great nonsense. This vile English climate of yours is horrid. And as for your stupid skies and things, they are nothing compared to ours. I have seen far finer sunsets than this; and it makes my eyes ache to look at it. Let us go in. I want to go to bed."

"I am sorry you are tired, dear," said Sandro again very kindly. "I am afraid I have made you do too much."

"I am so delicate!" said Ethel with a sigh. "I am so sensitive to climate and fatigue and everything of that kind. I am not like these great English milkmaids of yours—this Augusta Latrobe and Stella Branscombe. They look to me like grenadiers in petticoats—great, strong, coarse things! I am a mimosa; and they are great, square, tough-skinned oaks!"

"Oh!" said Sandro a little disconcerted. "But I am very sorry you are tired, Ethel. Perhaps I have made you do too much. I must take more care of you another time."

"Oh, *you* cannot take care of any one!" said Ethel rudely. "You are nothing but a stupid moony old artist. So good night, and try to get a little more sense if you can. It would not be to your disadvantage."

Saying which, she raised her big eyes to

Sandro with a look that was substantially a caress, while she openly yawned in his face.

For all that, she had an irresistible manner, and was famous for her power of fascinating men and conciliating women—even the women whom she dispossessed.

"How very glad I was to see Mr. Kemp again!" said Stella the next morning. "Were you glad too, Augusta?" she asked earnestly.

"Was I?" returned Augusta, with a heightened colour and a forced laugh. "That is rather what lawyers call a leading question, *Stella mia*. Yes and no. For some things I was very glad; for others I do not know what to say!"

"But which is most—your pleasure or your doubt?" the girl asked again.

"Come! come!" remonstrated Augusta, still laughing in the same forced way as before; "who made you my inquisitor, young lady? Why should I confess to you?"

"Because I love you and am your friend," said Stella. "And do not laugh, Augusta; I am so much in earnest!"

"Well, I will be in earnest, too," said Augusta, suddenly becoming serious. "I am more glad than sorry. I shall be much more glad if ——"

She stopped, looking out of the window in a hesitating, half-bashful way.

“If what, Augusta?”

“If I find that he has forgiven me a terrible wrong which I was forced to do him some time since, and that he likes me as much as he used to do;” said Augusta, making a little movement with her hands as if she had flung down something on the table.

“Then you do really love him! I never felt quite sure whether it was fancy or real love!” cried Stella, going up to her and kissing her with that odd impulse of sympathy which one woman feels for the love affairs of another.

“I like him as much as I did—as much, perhaps, as I could like any one,” said that disappointing Augusta, with a return to her old cautious and more natural attitude.

“Well enough to marry him?” asked Stella.

“Shall I wait till he asks me before I answer that question?” answered Augusta coldly; and the girl shrank back, feeling snubbed and rebuked.

“If ever I marry again,” Augusta went on to say quietly; “it will be to a man able to support me well and to assure my boy’s future. Else, be assured, little girl, I never shall!”

“What an extraordinary woman you are!”

said Stella, almost as if in soliloquy. "You are unlike any one I ever saw before."

"How? and why?" asked the widow.

"Such a strange mixture of reserve and frankness—of high principle and such dreadful worldliness!" answered Stella.

"Because I have common sense, and act upon it. What kind of mother should I be if I doomed my child to poverty and disinheritorship that I might make a fool's paradise for myself with a poor man? It is both wiser and better philosophy to bear patiently all the troubles which beset me at home, when I can not do better for him by leaving them. If I could improve, or keep his position even with what it is now, I would marry—any one I cared for—if he asked me; but only on consideration that Tony's future was not compromised."

Augusta spoke as calmly as if she had been speaking of parallelograms and rhomboids rather than the living impulses of love, the emotional forces of a life.

"Still it is strange to hear you discuss it all so coolly," said Stella, far from being satisfied and as far from being convinced.

She knew what it was to sacrifice love for duty in her own life; but this kind of frigid

calculation, this even balancing of accounts and relative values, was another matter altogether.

"If you did not want to hear the true truth, you should not have questioned me," said Augusta.

"I did want to hear the true truth," returned Stella.

The widow shook her head, half seriously, half playfully.

"I tell you what it is, Stella mia," she answered; "you are like all the rest; you want to hear only what pleases you and what suits your own ideas;—not things as they are, but things as they should be."

"If one loves any one one wants them to be perfect," said Stella, her grammar false, her sentiment true.

"And this confession of mine that I would not marry a poor man, even if I loved him, and that I would marry a rich one with only a moderate amount of affection, seems to you very imperfect, does it?" said Augusta.

"It seems too cold and calculating," repeated Stella.

"That is just what it is," Augusta exclaimed with a smile. "And I defend it on the ground that to be cold and calculating—that is, cool-

headed and rational—is to be wise, when the contrary is foolish."

"It is not having much romance in one's life," said Stella.

"Certainly not; but then you know I pride myself on not being romantic," said Augusta with exasperating tranquillity. "And, Stella mia, the best thing that you could do would be to follow my advice in this, and marry where the conditions were suitable, without bothering yourself too much about love. That would come, as I said before."

"Never!" answered Stella.

As she said this the door opened and the servant admitted Valentine Cowley. And when he had bidden them smilingly "Good morning," asked after the health of each as anxiously as if there had been cause for doubt, inquired, with almost paternal interest, where Tony was and how he did, and then disposed of his fine person on a chair, Stella got up from her place on the sofa and quietly left the room.

"I do believe that Miss Branscombe positively hates me!" said Val, stung to wrathful exaggeration as Stella disappeared through the doorway and left him to the widow.

"No, she is too gentle to hate any one, even if she had reason," said Augusta quietly. "And

she has no reason, that I know of, even to dislike, still less to hate, you."

"She does, reason or not. And I am sure I do not know what I have ever done to make her dislike me so much," said Val still hotly.

Augusta looked up. Her calm face betrayed the faintest little inclination to smile, and in her quiet eyes was something that looked very much like a mischievous little twinkle.

"Don't you think you follow her up a little too openly?" she said, with commendable demureness. "I think she gets a little frightened, and as if she did not know what was coming next. She is not a girl who cares for the admiration of men; and I think if I were you I would be more reserved and not show my hand quite so openly."

"I cannot help it!" said Valentine. "I do admire her, Mrs. Latrobe, more than I have admired any girl in my life. She is Supreme; my highest idea of a woman. Were I an artist I would paint Stella Branscombe as Dante's Beatrice."

"You mean to say that you are desperately in love with her," said Augusta quietly.

"Perhaps I am," he answered with a deep blush, making a feint to be uncertain.

"You know you are," said Augusta. "We

all know it—Stella too, if she would but own it.”

“Then, if she does, she treats me cruelly,” he said in much agitation.

“Why? Would you have her give you false hopes?” asked the widow.

“Why should they be false?” pleaded Val.

She shrugged her shoulders.

“Who can control these things?” she said. “If Stella saw with my eyes matters would be very different.”

“Then you are still my friend!” he cried in a voice of triumph.

He could not have used a more jocund tone had she promised him an earldom and given him a fortune.

“Undoubtedly,” she said in her quiet way. “I have always told you so. I despise Mr. Branscombe so much that I would give worlds to see Stella freed from him. She is unhappy as it is at home—she would be more unhappy still if she knew all!”

“Ah, I see,” said Val, holding up his head. “I am only a pis-aller even to you! You would have her take me to escape from her father;—not because she loved me—not because I love her and am worthy of her love.”

“My dear Mr. Cowley,” said the widow

smiling ; "I am one of those cold-blooded creatures who think that love is only one of the ingredients in marriage. We want so much else ! I would not counsel what even I should call a good marriage where there was decided dislike ; but provided there is harmony of taste, mutual respect and no pronounced aversion, I think a well-arranged marriage, without any great amount of love, has as much chance of turning out happily as one with. You know as well as I that Stella was engaged to Cyril Ponsonby ; and you can see as well as I that she has not quite got over her disappointment even yet. I should be very glad if you could make her forget him, as there seems no chance of that affair coming on again ; but——"

"But you would prefer Mr. Ponsonby?" interrupted Val with sarcastic fury.

"Of course I should!" she answered. "Failing him——"

"You would back me?" was his second interruption, as sarcastic and furious as the former.

"Certainly. You are a very nice fellow ; you love her ; you have enough now, and will have a splendid position when your father dies. I think it would be a charming marriage," said Augusta with maddening coolness.

"You flatter me!" said Val, the "risus sardonius" contorting his face.

"Oh! I have always been your advocate since the marriage with Cyril Ponsonby was broken off," said Augusta simply.

And here the conversation ended abruptly; for Sandro Kemp and Ethel White came in to make one of those formal visits in use among people who, living in the same place and doing the same things at the same hours, see each other two or three times a day but feel bound all the same to pay formal visits to each other's rooms, as if they lived miles apart and met only by chance once a month in general society.

The time at St. Ann's passed pleasantly enough for all concerned if we except Stella, whose pleasure was of a more intermittent kind than the others found theirs to be. The facilities of meeting were many and liberally utilized, and the five friends were, in a manner, inseparable. Still they clung together like five roses in a bunch, and private interviews between any two were of the things which were not. Mrs. White was always the centre, and the rest hung about her as bees round their queen. She had taken a great fancy to Stella, whom she treated as a younger sister needing careful chaperonage—and having it; Val was to her as

a younger brother, she said—"just what Cyril Ponsonby used to be to me!" she used to add in her sweet, languid way—fetching, carrying, meandering about her all day long in concert with cousin Sandro; and Augusta Latrobe was her confidante and never let out of sight. Thus it came about that no private interviews were possible where Ethel White was queen, and Sandro and Augusta looked at each other across the space that divided them—looked and longed and nothing more!

The evening promised to give one of those absolutely perfect sunsets which sometimes at the seaside make life an acted canto of poetry and the earth a very paradise of beauty. The wide dome was like one large opal, marked here and there with narrow crimson bars where the light airless clouds caught the redness of the sinking sun; but save these forestanding bars the whole dome was of resplendent purity, as bright and tender in its passage from the gold of the west to the purple of the east, as if this strong North Sea were the lagoons of Venice or the waters of the Mediterranean. All the visitors at St. Ann's had turned out on to the sands to watch the final decline of the sun; and among the rest were the five friends:—Ethel dressed as if for a foreign opera-house where she

might wear her bonnet, and with the paint and powder well concealed beneath her tightly-drawn white tulle veil. Naturally they all met on the sands; and as naturally when they had met they did not separate.

Ethel, giving cousin Sandro her folding-seat, her olive-wood footstool and her umbrella, asked Val to carry her shawl. She then took Stella's arm as her aid; thus placing herself between the girl and the man who loved her. Augusta was on Stella's other side; Sandro was walking in line, but at a little distance from them all. Seeing Tony doing something reprehensible with the seaweed, Augusta detached herself from the group and went back to the child. Before she knew what she was about she found herself alone with Sandro Kemp—Tony, out of his scrape and free from slime, running on ahead. It was the first time since his arrival that the artist had been with the widow out of earshot of his cousin; and he felt his heart beat as if it would break itself to pieces against his ribs, as he walked by the side of the woman whom he loved and who had paid back that love with such undeserved contempt—such cruel wrong.

He looked at her as she walked by his side with her easy step, at once light and firm; her

upright carriage, supple and yet so strong; her calm face, which seemed to him the face of a goddess—or was it only the face of a woman who knew her game and played it with judgment? The fixed smile, which he knew so well and which concealed so much, was on her lips, and her eyes had drawn over the soul, which else would have shone through them, that mask of calm candour, of indifference that was almost hardness, which with her implied an effort and betrayed a struggle. Both he shared. For he was doing his best to keep back that love which outraged pride should have destroyed for ever—which should have died when his self-respect had been assailed. And he could not! he could not!

“Tell me,” he said abruptly, when the silence between them had become too eloquent, too oppressive; “why did you write that letter?”

“It was my mother’s doing,” said Augusta, looking straight before her.

“It nearly broke my heart,” said Sandro, his voice faltering. “It made me doubt both Providence and humanity.”

“I am sorry,” said Augusta very softly.

“And your mother made you? It was not your own will? It did not come from your heart?”

He spoke in a low and agitated voice, to which the gentle murmur of the receding tide came as a symphony, lending it cadence and melody.

"How should it have come from my own heart?" she answered. "What reason had I to write such a cruel note to you?"

"It was cruel! You knew that it was cruel?" He took her hand and laid it on his arm. "You knew how I must suffer!" he said again.

"I knew that it was indefensible," she answered.

"I wish I could read you!" said Sandro feverishly. "You have always been the one woman in the world to me—the one perfect woman; but you have always been my Sphinx, too—lovely and inscrutable!"

"Have I?" she said.

She turned to him, and her eyes put off their mask for one instant. It was only for an instant, but it was enough. He caught his breath, and felt as if he staggered as he walked. What was false and what was true?—and which, of all those varying motives, those crossing feelings, was to be accepted?"

"You know that I am now rich," he said, speaking in the same sudden way as before.

"Yes," she answered frankly.

"Was it only my poverty in days gone by that stood between us?"

She looked at her little son.

"Yes," she answered. "It was for his sake."

"And now when I am rich?"

The crimson bars were burning slowly into purple; the golden glories of the burnished west were fading, and the translucent beauty of the opal was passing into one universal space of blue. One by one the stars came out as the day sank deeper into the sleep of night. From vapoury cloud the moon was now becoming clear and silvery. The soft peace and rest of night were falling on the earth and the hot turmoil and hard struggle of the day were done.

"And now when I am rich?" he asked again.

"You have all the power you wanted," she answered softly.

"Power to win your love?"

"That was never wanting," she said. "I had to be prudent but——"

A vivid blush and two sudden tears completed her sentence.

"My Queen! My beloved! At last I have

reached my goal and now see heaven open before me!” said Sandro. “Now that I have won you I forget all the rest. And, perhaps,” he added with all his old generous magnanimity; “perhaps I love you better for the pain you gave me, because it shows how great and good you are and how you can, when need be, sacrifice yourself to your duty.”

“It wanted only that!” said Augusta with indescribable tenderness of voice and face. “Now you hold me for ever!”

Just then the party before them came back on their steps.

“Cousin Sandro,” said Ethel languidly, “would you give me my pliant and footstool? And would you mind holding the umbrella over me? I am so tired and the wind is so cold!”

CHAPTER IX.

THE WEAVING WEB.

“I AM so sorry, Augusta !”

“About what, Stella, penserosa ?” laughed the widow.

For herself she did not look able to be very sorrowful about anything this morning. Never had her face been so sincerely bright ; never had been so frankly laid aside that mask of suave amiability, that appearance of unemotional suavity, which it was so often her best policy to assume. Her laugh had the joyous cadence of a child’s—laughing because she was glad, and glad she scarcely knew why ; her happy eyes, softened by love, shone clear and bright as the stars of last night’s sky ; her fair face looked younger, rounder, fresher than ever ; that pretty dimple in her cheek was deeper and her skin was as transparent as a rose-leaf. She had put back her age ten years at the least since

those fiery crimson bars had burned themselves out in the evening sky, to be lost in the tender peace of the silver moonlight—since the moment when Sandro Kemp had made the dark things clear, and had knitted up the ravelled sleeve of doubt and despair into a garment of certainty and divine content.

All the burden of her days was laid aside. She stood now free and unoppressed. For the first time in her life she was both safe and supremely happy. The man whom she loved loved her; he was rich, and she was to marry him. She was to escape from the grinding thralldom of her mother's house, yet keep her boy's future secure. The stars were on her side; fate had borrowed the golden wheel of fortune; and all her flowers had borne their fruits. She was happy; oh, how happy! And here was Stella looking into her face with a pucker of trouble on her own.

It seemed almost sacrilege to Augusta that any one should be dissatisfied to-day. Surely life was good and the earth divine for all!

"What is troubling you, dear?" she asked after a short pause, during which Stella had looked at her with a certain, scarce reproach so much as surprise, on her sensitive face for this unsympathetic brightness on her friend's.

“I have had a letter from papa,” said Stella.

“Yes? and then? He does not want you at home just yet, does he?” asked the widow.

“No; but he tells me I am to ask Hortensia Lyon to come and stay with me,” said Stella.

“And that afflicts your little ladyship?”

“I do not like it,” said Stella gravely.

She wished that Augusta would be more serious this morning, when she herself was so much disturbed!

“You do not like Hortensia, you mean?” said the widow.

“Not much,” answered Stella.

“Then why have her always, and always at Rose Hill?” asked Augusta.

“Papa likes her,” answered Stella.

“Oh,” said Augusta dryly. After a short pause she added frankly, with a pleasant laugh to take off the sting; “What a goose you are, Stella mia!”

“Why?” asked Stella, smiling for sympathy, but again a little surprised, this time by the vagueness as well as the abruptness of the accusation.

“Because you never see a danger until you are in the midst of it,” answered the widow. “You got surrounded by the tide the other day for want of looking about you. Val Cowley

helped you off then; you had better let him help you now out of a worse mess."

"Mr. Cowley—how I wish you would not speak of him," said Stella petulantly. "I hate his very name!"

"Do I not tell you that you are a goose?" returned Augusta tranquilly. "You would do far better to like it the best of all names in the world, and to let him help you."

"Help me from what? What is the worse mess you hint at?" asked Stella with a little shiver of dread as at the passing of ghostly footsteps—something intangible, yet full of terror.

"If you do not see it I will not enlighten you—at least not to-day," said the widow significantly but lightly. "Only, let me say again, you are to blame, my dear, for not escaping from the incoming tide while you can. Meantime, you have to write to Hortensia Lyon and beg her as a favour to come and interrupt our happiness. Ah! you see, even you, my straightforward Stella, have to be a little fox at times and work in ambush like others. Even you have to say one thing and mean another—as we all must on occasions!"

"First a goose and next a fox—what next?" said Stella forcing a laugh.

"And a duck always!" returned that silly

Augusta, looking at her with strange tenderness—silly and tender both, because she was so happy!

So the letter was written as Mr. Branscombe had desired, and Hortensia was besought to come to St. Ann's for a little change of air; it would do her so much good and give her affectionate friend Stella so much pleasure! And when this was done, and the letter posted beyond recall, Augusta had to spend some of her surplus strength and serenity in persuading her poor downhearted friend that it was the very best thing in the world which could have happened; and that they would be all the merrier, according to the old proverb, by the introduction among them of that one more, albeit the most notorious wet-blanket and puritanical kill-joy to be found in Highwood.

"We will put her and Mrs. White together," said Augusta, laughing like a harebrained school-girl. "How they will hate each other! They will be like two Kilkenny cats, or a couple of Sir John Lubbock's stranger ants. There will be nothing left of either in a short time."

But Stella was moody and a little cross, and between Val Cowley and Evangeline saw nothing to laugh at in the matter.

"Hortensia will never consent to go with Mrs. White," she answered, wilfully making the worst of things. "She will fasten herself on me from morning to night. I know her so well! And of course, as I am her special friend and have had to ask her, I shall be forced to look after her. And then I shall see nothing of you, Augusta!"

She forgot that, if this view of Hortensia's advent and its results were true, she would be protected from Val Cowley's unwelcome attentions, even if cut off from her present close communion with Augusta. She was too much disturbed to remember anything by way of mitigation.

"Oh yes, you will! You will see as much of me as you do now—as much of me as you like," answered the widow cheerily. "Courage! It may not turn out so badly after all. You will always have me as your background, of course; and if Mrs. White is of no good, your poor despised Val Cowley will come in useful as a paratonnere," she added with good-humoured maliciousness.

Nothing could be more delightful than Augusta's manner and nothing could be less natural. It was the truth, but not the whole truth—nothing feigned, but something concealed.

Stella's colour came suddenly into her face, and as suddenly the egoistical trouble which had clouded it left it free, expansive, loving, as it was by the royal gift of nature. She fixed her eyes with an eager kind of light on her friend.

"Only these?" she asked smiling and with meaning. "Mrs. White, Mr. Cowley, yourself—no one else that I may count on for championship?"

"And Tony, who is devoted to you. You are the boy's first love, Stella. Little scamp! he has begun early!" said Tony's mother quite pleasantly, not looking at her friend and not rising to her fly.

"And no one else?" asked Stella again.

"You mean Mr. Kemp? Of course, Mr. Kemp. He has always been your faithful friend and preux chevalier, and is as devoted to you in his way as Tony is in his. Of course, Mr. Kemp," said Augusta, with studied indifference, still declining to be "drawn."

But what she declined Stella divined. Going behind the sofa, where the fair widow sat, very prosaically mending the knees of her boy's stockings, Stella bent back her head and kissed her on the forehead.

"My darling! dear, dearest Augusta!" she

said softly. "No more tears now by the river-side! All dried now, Augusta, since last evening! I am so glad, so glad!"

"Silly child! What do you mean?" laughed the widow, putting up her soft white hand to caress the face bending so lovingly over hers.

"Everything. Tell me the truth. It is, is it not, Augusta?" asked Stella, in the enigmatic language of confidential women handling a love-secret daintily.

It was a language however, that was as well understood by the hearer as by the speaker—an enigma to which each had the key. The soft, clear eyes of the pretty widow grew dark and humid, and her fresh mouth slightly quivered as she smiled.

"Yes," she said; "it is. Oh, Stella, how happy I am! Ah! my child, how I wish that you had as much true happiness as I have to-day! Waited for so long, and now come at last! So perhaps it will be for you."

"Your happiness is mine, darling," said Stella tenderly; but her soft eyes filled with tears which somewhat belied her braver words.

"It will come!" said the widow lovingly; and then the boy rushed, shouting and skipping, into the room and cut short the delicately-

touched confidences of the friends by the prodigality with which he gave his own.

The promise of the glorious sunset and the message of the tranquil night were well kept in the exquisite beauty of the day. It was a day when to live was blessedness—what then was it to live, to love and to be loved! And after Augusta had fulfilled her prosaic but, all things considered, necessary domestic duty of weaving mats over the holes and running shafts up the “Jacob’s ladders” of Tony’s stockings, she and her two “children” went out on the sands as usual. As usual too, they were joined by the cousins and Val Cowley; and the parti-coloured web of their various lives went on weaving itself in the old way.

No great change in the external aspect of things was made this morning. They all kept in a compact body because Ethel needed now cousin Sandro’s arm and now Val Cowley’s hand; because the one had to carry this and the other had to give her that; because dear Mrs. Latrobe—whom might she call Augusta?—was so full of information on every question she could not do without her as her charming encyclopædia; and dear Miss Branscombe—whom really she must call Stella, might she?—looked so sweet in that grey felt hat with that

soft scarf wound so picturesquely round her, she must positively be put into cousin Sandro's sketch book ; because she posed as a queen and lisped her songs of enchantment like a siren, and so brought both men and women under the sway of her sceptre and the spell of her power. Thus, she made it impossible for the little party to fall asunder or to follow their own devices, and she kept them briskly to their main duty of attending on her.

So the morning passed in all outward appearance of serenity, if secretly the sense of frustration, capture, disappointment and boredom rather spoiled the spirit of the thing ; and in the afternoon the hotel break came round at three o'clock, as usual, and the six souls at this moment blended in one group, re-assembled at the door for their daily drive. They had arranged to go again to that fine old castle which had been the object of their expedition on the memorable day when had arrived Sandro Kemp with his cousin Ethel White, and Val Cowley with only love as his comrade ; and to some at least among them those grey old stones would wear a different aspect and tell a different story from that which they had worn and told, counting by time, not so very long ago. Counting by time not so very long ago, but by events

—how infinite the space between now and then!

How beautiful it was! Fresh yet genial, the air blowing from the distant mountains set like a blue barrier between earth and sky, was as if full of hope and life and faith and love; while the grand old castle, standing as a witness of the hoary past all now crumbled to ruin and decay, was also as a witness of the lush and living present in the thick luxuriant growths which spoke of spring-time and its vitality—in the subtle scents which added grace to strength—in the tender flowers which gave beauty to endurance and concealed the scars of time by the touch of love. Here somehow, the little group usually kept so close and compact did get separated. While Valentine Cowley was holding her large white umbrella over Ethel, as she leaned with plaintive grace on his strong young arm—her other hand laid on Stella's shoulder for double support to her weakness and sisterly companionship to her soul—Sandro and Augusta found themselves opportunely lost somewhere about the outer lines. They were by the side of the old dry moat where no one spied after them, and where little Tony, at once their bond and their shield, knew no more of what was passing between them than did the

birds in the bushes or the lambs in the fields. It was like these two lovers not to speak of their future ; not to make plans for remote days ; not to anticipate dates or events. They knew that they were sure ; but they knew also that Augusta would have to pass over burning ploughshares before she should come to her final peace in love. Sufficient then for the day was its joy as its sorrow ; emphatically sufficient.

They walked together scarcely speaking ; but sometimes his long, long look into the eyes which, no longer veiled, glassy, cold, were now so frankly tender, so eloquent of a love at once honest, pure, faithful and not ashamed, was like speech to both ; and sometimes her soft questioning face was like a loving caress to him, which his smile returned. How happy they were !—how trustful, how strong ! It was love without any of love’s folly, void of his fears, free of his doubts ; it was love which gave life and was ready for death. It was the love of a man and a woman who knew the value of the stakes for which they had played and now had won—a man and woman who had known the sorrow of the struggle before they had come to the glad triumph of the victory. But it was quiet, undemonstrative, assured, serene. It was love that was felt, not love that was made—it

was love that was a fact and a vow, and in nowise a mere hope or a dream. And thus it was that in the undisturbed security of this quiet wandering through the deserted courts and alleys of the old ruined castle, the future was not touched on and the rich totality of the present was accepted almost as if it were all that was to be.

At last this pleasant ramble was interrupted by the trio whereof Ethel was the central figure. Incautiously Sandro and Augusta passed the open space whence those in the inner court looked out across the breach to the landscape beyond. The quick eyes of the "Queen" caught the passing figures; and henceforth their isolation was at an end. Cousin Sandro must be brought back to his duty of attendance, and Augusta Latrobe must be made to understand hers of subordination.

"Cousin! Cousin Sandro!" Ethel called in her clear, sweet, flute-like voice. "Cousin Sandro!"

He looked at Augusta with a smile deprecating and regretful. She looked back at him with a smile that matched his own, cheerful but regretful too. There was nothing for it however, but to turn up through the opening and go back to their former posts—their little

spell of eloquent silence and loving liberty at an end.

"Cousin Sandro," said Ethel very prettily ; "I do wish that you would make a sketch of this view. It is so lovely ! Make a nice little sketch, cousin, and put us all in !"

Ethel was one of those women who never let a man forget his profession. If an artist, she would perpetually beg him to make a sketch of this, a picture of that, and give it to her ; if a musician, no matter of what rank nor of what delicate organization, she would beg for a "little music" on an ill-toned piano, for a "nice little song" out on the lake or the moor. Of a philosopher she would have asked, in a coaxing way ; "Tell me what Hegelianism or Spinozism is ?" Of a mathematician she would have demanded the explanation of logarithms, or how "to do" algebra. Wherefore now, to cousin Sandro, she said : "Make a nice little sketch, cousin, and put us all in !" as she would have asked Tony to pull her a daisy.

"I will make a sketch if you like, but I do not know about putting you all in," said Sandro gently. "I have not time to make you perfect ; and I would not like to spoil you."

"Well ! do something," said Ethel with

pretty authority, tapping his arm with her fan ; and her cousin smiled and obeyed.

This "passed the time," as people say—that time which passes so much too quickly for us all !—until Ethel was tired of sitting there even as queen of her little court ; and again they began to make those explorations which were the ostensible reason of their visit to the old ruin. By one of those odd pieces of chance shuffling which sometimes happen with people as with cards, Val Cowley and Stella were thrown together alone, to his delight and the girl's dismay. They were on that same lower line where Augusta and Sandro had walked—by the side of the old moat. This was now dry and grassy and filled with wild-flowers of all kinds ; while against the walls of the outer court grew sundry rose-bushes, choked with docks and wild-briars, and themselves almost wild for lack of care and cultivation.

Valentine was in his element in a scene like this. He had a keen imagination and a facile, fluent knack of ornate speech which made a good substitute for true poetry. The present scene excited him, and the rare opportunity of a confidential talk with Stella excited him still more. Though he knew that he made no way with her and that her face was set as a flint

against him, he lived ever in expectation of the new birth and the working of the miracle that was to change all. At this moment he was a knight of olden time and she was a gentle lady to whom he paid his devotions; so he launched out into time and space, and, always meaning himself and Stella, poured forth a rhapsody about the chivalrous past, of which, of course, he made his ideal society. It was a torrent of words as pretty to listen to as he was handsome to look at; and, with that undercurrent of meaning to give it life, it was not the mere fustian that else it would have been. It had the merit of earnestness of intention, if the method was a little affected; and Stella could not be deaf to the real meaning of it all.

At last they came to a plot of rose-trees which had once been evidently objects of some care. Now they were mere graceful sweet-scented weeds, scarcely worthy of the name of roses at all. Val, having finished a spirited sketch of a tournament wherein he was the successful knight and Stella was the Queen of Beauty, suddenly changed the key-note of his fanciful melody as he stopped before this plot of neglected rose-trees.

"What an emblem of life!" he said in a melancholy voice. "What a visible sign of the wasting power of neglect and loneliness!"

Stella looked with studied indifference at the straggling, spindled bushes.

"Yes; they want pruning dreadfully! But they are of a very poor kind," she said in a dull, matter-of-fact way that had far more power of wounding in it than if she had argued the question on its merits and had laughed at the sentimental application.

Her manner was so wounding, so matter-of-fact, so chilling, that Valentine found it impossible to go on, and stopped short in his display. How could he continue these brilliant fireworks of fancy in the face of a leaden indifference which acted on his mind as some kind of paralyzing agent acts on the nerves? At times he felt as if he hated this girl whose love he was making these ever baffled, ever unsuccessful efforts to win; and this was one of them. Then his sudden ill-humour passed, and he forgave her because he loved her.

He halted for the second time before one large straggling bush, where the young pink buds were beginning to show themselves among the leaflets of tender green, through the tangle of weeds and coarser growths which threatened to choke the whole tree.

"Corisande gave Lothair a rose," he said significantly. "Will you be my Corisande and

make me your Lothair? Will you give me a rose, Miss Branscombe?"

"I never act charades," said Stella coldly.

"Would it be a charade to give me a flower?" asked Val hastily.

"Something like it," returned Stella.

"Charades are acted words. What word would that make?" said Val, making an effort over himself not to be offended. "Miss Branscombe gives Valentine Cowley a rose;—what can one make out of that? Something that would express the lady's bestowal of her favour on her knight. Can you think of anything, Miss Branscombe?"

"No," said Stella curtly; "and if I knew of any word it would not fit, for certainly I shall not give you a flower, nor, if I did, would it be like a lady bestowing her favour on her knight; quite the contrary."

Now all this was rude and ungentle enough; but Stella was getting frightened at her position and felt that she must break through the toils weaving themselves around her, at once and unmistakably if at all. If only she could prevent that declaration which was so near, and which would be such a mistake when made!

Just then Tony came singing round the

corner. With what a sense of relief the half-frightened, half-revolted girl called to him to come and see the beautiful green beetle in the grass at her feet, like a glittering jewel fallen from the sky to the earth! In her eagerness to escape from her present companion she fairly ran to catch the flying little Puck whose madcap humour was not to be depended on. And Val understood why. He bit the inside of his cheek savagely, and turned away humming a fragment of Offenbach to express an indifference of equal weight and measure with her own. But he failed, as of course; and Stella had the girl's naughty pleasure of knowing that she had not only saved herself from an unpleasant confession but that she had annoyed the man who had wanted to make it. For the cruellest and most heartless creature in the world is the woman who is pursued against her will by a man whom she does not like.

Val spent all that remained of the afternoon in the most devoted attention to Ethel White. But Ethel, who understood the whole science of love-making from A to Z, was not deceived by this sudden fervour, and laughed softly to herself as she looked at Stella from between her narrowed eyes.

Three days after this the train brought to

St. Ann's not only Hortensia, who was expected, but Mr. Branscombe and Randolph Mackenzie, of whom no one had dreamed.

In spite of Mrs. Lyon's dislike to the proposal—perhaps a little because of that dislike and its somewhat imprudent expression—Mr. Lyon allowed his little maid to accept Stella's invitation. And even when old Finery Fred said that he himself would take the dear child, even then Hortensia's father did not disapprove, though her mother did. He accepted the offer as frankly as it was made; but he supplemented it by slipping a bank-note into Randolph's hand, saying:

"I should like you to go, too, Ran, my boy. You will take care of your cousin; and it will be a nice outing for you."

"If any one is wanted to take care of the child I ought to go, William," said Mrs. Lyon tartly.

"Oh! she will do well enough with Stella to amuse her and Mrs. Latrobe to look after her! You are best at home with me, Cara," returned the husband.

"But why is Mr. Branscombe going?" asked Cara uneasily. "I do not like it, William; I do not like it at all!" she repeated, with the reduplication so much indulged in by weak people.

"Why should he not go to his daughter, wiseacre?" laughed her husband, a little contemptuous in his playfulness.

"William, you are blind and deaf, and worse than mad!" said Mrs. Lyon angrily. "You do not see that the child likes that old fop a great deal better than she ought; and you encourage what will some day be her ruin and your own shame. Now I have said it!" she added, folding her hands with a kind of desperate resignation to sin and its punishment.

"No, Cara, it is you who are mad," answered her husband still more angrily. "Like all silly women you run your foolish head against posts of your own making, and see dangers which do not exist out of your own heated fancy. You are always in full cry after love—love, love everywhere! An old fellow like that—older than I am—his wife not dead quite a year—and the child young enough to be his granddaughter! It hurts me to think you capable of imagining such a monstrosity," he added, getting up and walking about the room, fuming with rage against his wife, Finery Fred Branscombe, his little maid and life in general, but not against himself nor his decision.

"And when it is too late you will have to confess that I was right," said Mrs. Lyon,

roused to that point of irritation which has no fear of consequence. “But you are like all men, William; you never see an inch beyond your own nose, and you are far too conceited to allow that other people see better than yourselves!”

“I have more faith than you, both in the child’s common sense and propriety of feeling, and in the natural goodness of the human heart,” said Mr. Lyon loftily; “and let us hear no more about it, Cara. It is my will that she goes to St. Ann’s; the change will do her good; and Ran will look after her.”

“I wish I had died when she was born, and then you might have had her all to yourself and done what you liked with her for ever!” said Mrs. Lyon, bursting into tears.

But when she began to sob her husband’s heart softened towards her, as indeed it always did when she broke down, if he never changed his resolution for the sake of her tears; and after having given her a friendly kind of kiss and told her not to be a fool but to trust more to him than she did, he proposed that they should have an outing on their own account while their little maid was away, and that they should go to Manchester for a week. And when he had done this, he had satisfied his

masculine conscience, and henceforth held himself free to consider the whole thing at an end and all his shortcomings atoned for.

“She is a good soul,” he said to himself; “but as weak as water and as soft as butter. Still, she is a good soul, and deserves a little care when she gets low. And she shall have it.”

She on her part thought:

“William is a dear old fellow, but he treats me like a child, and thinks he can make me forget how he wrongs me as a mother by giving me a little treat or a new bonnet—as if I were a mere baby or really the fool he thinks me!”

So the waxen surface here was more of a surface than either suspected the other knew.

CHAPTER X.

UNDER PRESSURE.

THE arrival of the three new comers from Highwood shifted the whole arrangement of things at St. Ann's. To Augusta and Sandro it brought the relief of comparative freedom, with the need of still more vigilant prudence if they did not want their affairs made public property betimes; to Stella it was bondage in the courts of purgatory—Hortensia ever between her and her father, and that father gently but inexorably thrusting her nearer and nearer to Val; to Val it was reinforcement; to Ethel White it was extension of domain and one more courtier in her train.

As for Mr. Branscombe, his desire that his daughter should marry the possessor of Greyhurst Manor was unquestionably the central point of the whole position, but one which he thought no one discerned. When he walked

and talked apart with Val it was to himself as if he offered to the world a beautiful picture, whereof the motif was that of a teacher instructing an alumnus, one of the illuminati inspiring an acolyte, Mentor with Telemachus. He did not think that Ethel White said to herself: "He is trying to catch the young heir for his daughter;" that Augusta Latrobe said to Sandro: "I want Stella to marry Val Cowley, but really that old creature's manœuvres are too indelicately open;" and that Randolph Mackenzie, as clearsighted as the rest, had almost a quarrel with Hortensia because he said he wished Mr. Branscombe would not make so much of Val Cowley, and she answered loftily that Mr. Branscombe was the best judge of his own conduct, and that if he thought Mr. Cowley a fit companion for himself and Stella, he was quite right to make much of him—as he was right in everything that he did. All this was hidden from Finery Fred to whom Val was the occasion for both present display and past demonstration—his pupil now but himself rejuvenated. All the same it was an open secret that he wished this younger transcript of himself to marry Stella; and that he was doing what he could to help on the affair, and force his reluctant daughter to yield to fate and his will.

Surrounded by friends though she was, Stella felt that she was like a hunted creature standing at bay—a creature, save for the faithful advocacy of Randolph Mackenzie, absolutely alone and undefended. She could not rely even on Augusta, for Augusta was on Val’s side and always advocated what she called “escape” by means of him. Hortensia had lately made herself the handsome young fellow’s ardent encomiast; and Ethel White followed in the same strain. So that, hemmed in on all sides as she was, the line of careful walking was fearfully narrowed for the poor child, and she scarcely knew how to escape the pitfalls which abounded.

One day they were all on the sands, as usual. Stella and Hortensia were standing close to Mr. Branscombe; Ethel was sitting on her campstool under the shade of the big white umbrella which Finery Fred held over her with his best air of devotion and chivalry; Valentine Cowley and Randolph Mackenzie were on the outer margin of the group—a little to the back of Ethel—both looking at Stella; Stella was looking at the sea; Hortensia’s eyes were raised to Mr. Branscombe, whose chivalrous devotion to this painted woman from India seemed to her somewhat strange and in some sort a desecration;

Sandro Kemp and Augusta were at the back of all, looking at the sea, the sky, the little boy digging a hole that was to go to the middle of the earth, and at each other. By degrees they edged away from the rest, and were soon out of hearing and then out of sight, as they rounded the spur of the cliff—and the barrier of the Lover's Leap rose behind them.

Soon after this, Mr. Branscombe, at her command offering his right arm to Ethel, and having on his left Hortensia, led the march of his little cohort across the firm, clean sands. Stella took her place next to Hortensia, and heroically conquered her inclination to dispossess her as an intruder who had taken what did not belong to her—a cuckoo who was shouldering out the lawful inhabitant of the nest. She would have found it too late had she tried. The mischief had been done. Hortensia had been wiser than Stella; and flattery had proved more potent than love. Soon the stretch of dry, firm, unmarked sands narrowed to a mere slip; and the ribbed and furrowed tract, with the wet lying in the hollows, necessitated the falling back of some among them. They could not walk dryshod in a line of six. Hortensia was on Mr. Branscombe's left arm, Ethel White was on his right, as has

been said; Stella and the two young men were thus walking free. Was not the fitness of things evident?

"My dear child!" said Mr. Branscombe, with his best-bred air of parental tenderness; "I pray you not to walk through that wet! Mr. Cowley, let me delegate to you my duty of care and protection. Will you kindly look after my child?"

"I do not want any one to look after me, papa," said Stella hastily.

"Dear Stella, why do you not do as your father wishes without always answering back and opposing?" said Hortensia in a low, grave, reproving voice, but distinct enough for Mr. Branscombe to hear.

As his commentary he pressed her hand against his side, and stooping his handsome head, whispered in her ear:

"Little saint! child angel! soul of seraphic purity! mind of honey sweetness!"

Stella heard the whisper, as perhaps it was intended that she should. If so, it had the effect desired, for she fell back at once, pale as death, her eyes dark with tears which yet must perforce remain unshed. Impulsively she held out her hand to Randolph Mackenzie and turned her shoulder to Val Cowley. Poor Ran-

dolph! All things considered it was rather hard on him to make him merely the shield and buckler against another—to smile on him by way of emphasizing a frown!

Soon after this Ethel said again that she was tired. Her indolent Indian habits clung to her, and she found walking for her health, as she had been ordered to do, one of the most disagreeable facts of her life. Hence she was always sitting down under this undeniable pretext of being tired; which thus made the folding-seat and the folding-footstool, the shawl, the big umbrella, and the bearers of these same, necessary parts of her equipage. To-day it was Randolph who carried the greater part of her things, while Mr. Branscombe was her knight in courtly attendance. Val Cowley, strange to say, was left free and entrusted with no particular function; and Stella, whose place with her father was taken by Hortensia and whose sisterhood with Ethel had become a little slack, was as *désœuvrée* as the Admirable Crichton. Mr. Branscombe, standing in an elegant attitude near Mrs. White, with a fine mingling of protection and deference in his pose, like a lord-in-waiting doing his *devoir* to the queen, gave the big white umbrella, which was heavy, to Randolph Mackenzie to hold,

while he himself, still having Hortensia on his arm, held over her the light parasol which cost him no effort. Then turning to his daughter with a smile which he passed on with a peculiar look to Valentine Cowley, he said in dulcet tones of very positive command:

"I wish you two young people would take a brisk walk together. You have come here for your health, my dear Stella. This is not doing justice to your very admirable physician, nor to yourself, nor to me. Mr. Cowley, may I again delegate my duties? Will you kindly escort my daughter in a swift and health-giving walk across the sands?"

"With pleasure," said Val eagerly.

"No, papa," said Stella reluctantly.

"Oh, Stella, don't object so much!" again remonstrated Hortensia in her low, reproving and clearly-heard tones.

"I do not want to walk," said Stella not heeding Hortensia—standing this time fairly at bay.

"It is my wish, my dear child," said Mr. Branscombe with a singular smile. "Mr. Cowley will accompany you."

"Shall I go too, Miss Stella?" asked Randolph, oblivious of the duty to which he had been told off, and only anxious to help his dear

Star whose pained and harassed look cut him to the heart.

"Yes," said Stella, as impulsively as she had offered him her hand; "do you come too, Randolph!"

"My dear, good, obtuse, young friend," said Mr. Branscombe with playful impertinence; "and this fair lady's umbrella? No; stay where you are, Mr. Randolph; and do you, my dear Mr. Cowley, go as my child's guardian against the scaly monsters of the deep. And now, my dear Stella, no more opposition, I beg. Take the walk prescribed for you by circumstances and common sense—the walk which is the *raison d'être* of your being here at all."

"Come, Miss Branscombe;—it will do you good," said Val.

And Stella, feeling herself indeed surrounded by the tide, but not with Val Cowley this time as her saviour, suddenly withdrew her opposition and yielded to the pressure put on her. She said nothing; she simply stiffened her slender neck, as her manner was when she felt obstinate and was displeased, and set off without a word, to meet what she knew would be one of the most important crises of her life. She gave one glance of mingled entreaty and despair to Randolph as she turned away; but if

she could not help herself neither could he. The Philistines were upon her and she must go through her trial to the end.

Val had had a long talk that morning with Mr. Branscombe which had finally settled the preliminaries of things. He was authorized by the father to propose to the daughter ; and he was assured that she would consent—if not now then hereafter. It went against him to feel that perhaps by this Mr. Branscombe meant a little parental coercion ; but he was in for it now and tired of indecision.

Scarcely knowing whether he most loved the girl he wanted to win, or most hated her because she would not be won—wanting to see clearly the thing as it was, and to put an end to doubt or to begin his happiness—supported by Mr. Branscombe—encouraged by Augusta;—helped by his young man's vanity and spurred on by his jealousy of the past—he made Stella that offer which had so long hung fire and which it was Mr. Branscombe's intention she should accept.

And when he had made it, Stella said "No," out there in the sunlight, clearly, loudly, unmistakably. The birds heard it as they flew overhead, the wind carried it to the sea, and the sea echoed it back to the land. It was to

Val as if all nature knew and scoffed at his discomfiture ; as if a brazen wall had suddenly built itself up between him and her—between him and the sun—between him and all the happiness and honour of life.

“No,” she said firmly, under pressure and brought to bay as she was. “I do not love you, Mr. Cowley, and I never could love you ; and I will never marry you, never ! never !”

“Oh,” said Val cruelly ; “I see you still love that fellow, Cyril, who flirted with Mrs. White till he compromised his own name and hers. Miss Branscombe ! I should have thought you had had more pride than this !”

Stella turned on him as an Amazon might have turned on a curled and scented Corinthian. How her eyes flashed and the roseleaf of her cheeks deepened to flaming crimson—to blood-red fire !

“Do not you dare to speak of Mr. Ponsonby like that !” she cried with more passion than he thought she possessed. “It is no affair of yours whether I still love him or not, or what he may have done in India. I am his friend now as I always was ; and neither you nor any one else shall speak against him in my presence. That is not the way to make me your friend, Mr. Cowley.”

To which said Val, with less chivalrousness than pride and temper, with less manly dignity than boyish pique :

“I do not care for the friendship of a girl who can still love a man who no longer loves her.”

So there went the whole house of cards ;—and Stella’s soul was still to be made after Mr. Valentine Cowley’s plan ; while her hand was yet to be won in that matrimonial market where her father had so openly placed her.

That evening Ethel White wrote a long letter to Cyril Ponsonby. She was one of those women who spend half their lives in writing long letters to young men. It was her sole occupation after she had read the gossip columns in the weekly papers and the police reports in the daily journals. The end of the letter ran thus :

“Your old flame, Stella Branscombe, and her father are here ; so are a certain Mr. Valentine Cowley who is her adorer, and Miss Hortensia Lyon who is his—I mean Mr. Branscombe’s. I don’t know how far things have gone with these last, but they have certainly gone some distance on that way of matrimony which some one once called the grave of love. Old Branscombe makes a perfect fool of the little girl,

and she returns the compliment by making a perfect fool of him; Mr. Cowley is very assiduous in his attentions to Miss Stella, but she fights shy of him on every occasion. It is evidently a case of the father's will and the girl's dislike. She is a sweet dear creature, and I love her like my sister; and I confess I pity her. I wish that she would marry Mr. Cowley, or a certain big blundering but very good-hearted Mr. Randolph Mackenzie, who worships her down to the ground. She has trouble before her else. Her father is an old horror; and as for her future stepmother I should like to see her well shaken. Now write me a long letter of station news in return for my budget, and tell me how you and that little Letty Jones are going on. I think Miss Letty touched you? Remember me always as your sincere friend and sympathizing confidante,

“ETHEL WHITE.”

“I wonder if I have done that little toad a good turn by telling Cyril Ponsonby all this?” said Ethel to herself when she had finished her letter. “She is a proud, cross, cold little wretch, but I should like to see her out of her scrape if only to spite that awful old father of hers. I wonder if Cyril likes her still? If he

does he ought to come home at once and take Miss Stella to himself like that flying man who rescued the girl on the rock from the monster. Heigh ho! He would make a very nice lover—at least I should think so!” she added, with an odd little sigh.

CHAPTER XI.

AT THE REBOUND.

“GOOD-BYE, Mr. Branscombe ! I am off by the evening train.”

Valentine tried to speak with the masterly ease of indifference. He succeeded only in speaking with the ill-concealed wrath of offended love, the savage nonchalance of wounded pride and the brusqueness of a decidedly unheroic fit of ill-temper. What a fool he had been ! he thought bitterly. What made him tempt Providence as he had done, and put himself in the humiliating position of a rejected lover, when he ought to have seen and known beforehand that Stella would not marry him ? She had been frank enough in her declared aversion for him. He could not blame her for coquetry, nor say that she had given a fellow false hopes. Why then, had he not

accepted her lead rather than her father's false flourish of support and Augusta Latrobe's perfectly useless advocacy? It had been his own fault all through; but that did not make it the better to bear. On the contrary, it made it the worse. For he could not shelter himself behind that friendly plea of bad calculators and worse actors, and say with a flourish, accusing Providence: “Just my luck!” For just my luck had been his own wilful conduct, his vanity and his folly; and he knew it. So now when he stood at the postern gate which led from the fool's paradise in which he had been blindly walking into the stern reality of facts as they were, he had no help for it but to pass through, railing at fools' paradises in general as he stumbled over the bad places of the real thing. Wherefore he gathered up his forces and said “Good-bye” to Mr. Branscombe with affected unconcern—his departure confessing his discomforture.

“A farewell? — going by this evening's train? Indeed! Your leaving us in the midst of our pleasant villeggiatura is as sudden as it is grievous,” said Finery Fred gravely.

He looked from Valentine—flushed, affectedly debonnaire, secretly angry, outwardly polite, inwardly chafing that he could not show the

insolence and temper which he felt—to Stella who, now that she had finally taken her stand and shaken off her erotic incubus, was just the least bit in the world afraid of that dear papa of hers; yet afraid only on the surface of things—resolute enough at the core!

“I must go—I—I——” stammered Val, who had forgotten to make up an excuse and who was not good at sudden reasons delivered point-blank out of the vague.

“You have received letters of business?—a telegram from the Master?—your father is dangerously ill?” said Mr. Branscombe with a disagreeable smile. “I see, Mr. Cowley!—the old chapelet of excuses to mask an inclination which we do not wish to confess.”

“No inclination, sir, necessity,” said Valentine.

“Stella, my child, will you not ask Mr. Cowley to remain yet a little while longer as our honoured guest?” said Mr. Branscombe with a sweet manner and a severe face.

By the way, Valentine Cowley paid his own hotel bills; but it sounded well to call him their guest; and Mr. Branscombe was a man whose poetic fancy was at all times grandly superior to the fettering contraction of literalness.

“Mr. Cowley knows best what he ought to

do," said Stella with a moral hardihood which surprised herself, personally quaking, as she was, with fear of her father's certain displeasure when she should be alone with him and he should have learned all.

"Thanks for the rebuke, my child," Mr. Branscombe answered with another of his most silky and therefore most disagreeable smiles; "a rebuke somewhat sharply administered, but supremely just. Precious balms from the hand of a child, breaking a father's head but purifying his heart and directing his conduct. Thank you, my love!"

"I did not mean that, papa," said Stella earnestly.

"No?" He smiled again; this time with almost pathetic magnanimity. "Then you did what you would not. By accident you made yourself the guiding angel to your father—the lost wayfarer. By accident or design I equally thank you, my daughter."

"At all events I must go," said Val, whose ill-humour did not reach the length of liking to hear Stella virtually bullied while apparently commended, and who at this moment hated old Finery Fred almost past bearing.

"I am sorry," said Mr. Branscombe with dignity.

“Why don’t you ask him to stay, Stella, when your father tells you?” said Hortensia in that low voice of hers, which sounded so dulcet, so modest and which was so audible.

“Because my daughter has not the sweet submission of her little friend,” said Mr. Branscombe, answering the girl. “Because she thinks her judgment superior to her father’s, and prefers the green fruit of unripeness to the golden grain of experience—that is why, my dear Miss Hortensia Lyon—and I wish it were otherwise.”

“I do not wish Miss Branscombe to ask me to stay, if it is against her real wish,” said Val, gallantly effacing his disappointment.

“A dutiful child should have but one wish, and that her father’s,” said Finery Fred with unction.

“Sometimes that is impossible,” said Stella.

“As now?” her father asked with meaning.

Val turned a flushed face and a pair of darkened eyes towards the girl; Mr. Branscombe put on his pince-nez and looked at her seriously; Hortensia plucked at her sleeve and in her audible way again whispered:

“Do as your father wishes, Stella. It is too dreadful to see how disobedient you are!”

Augusta, who as yet had not taken any part

in this discussion, whereof the mystery was so unconcealed and the secret so open—who had sat a little apart, watching the whole play but aside from it all—now forced Stella to look at her by the magnetic attraction of her eyes, the power of her will, the electric vitality of her thought.

“Yield!—accept Valentine Cowley as your husband, else worse will befall you,” said Augusta’s eyes. “You are surrounded by the tide; let him carry you from danger to safety.”

It was to Stella as if she heard these words—as if they were said as distinctly by Augusta’s face as they would have been by her voice. For the moment she felt as if she were carried away in the swirl of a torrent. Would she do well to obey her beloved father’s will and follow her dear friend’s wise advice?—or was it better to stand by her barren fidelity to the past and let the present go by the board? Would it be well to escape from home pain and personal humiliation by this—to her way of thinking—dishonourable and unblessed marriage with Valentine Cowley?—or was it better that she should bear in patience and in constancy the domestic cross of her father’s displeasure—retaining as her inalienable treasure the right to love

without sin to the end of her days the only man whom she ever could love?

This moral indecision lasted but for an instant. Then came back the clear, swift, strong perception of her highest duty, her noblest self-respect.

"No," she said firmly, but with a soft voice and eyes more sad than defiant; still for all that sadness it was firmness in which vibrated not the faintest echo of weak self-surrender. "I cannot and will not ask Mr. Cowley to stay."

All was now told, all known, all confessed. Her way of escape was shut off by her own hand and henceforth she must bear the pain which she would not renounce when she could. She had chosen her part; and only her own conscience — and Randolph Mackenzie — said that she had done well and that it would have been base had she done otherwise.

So poor, rejected, disappointed Val left by the evening mail, as he said; and finally and for ever that prettily-built castle in Spain vanished into smoke, leaving a very unpleasant residuum of ashes behind.

"You have disappointed me; you have angered me; you have grievously and wantonly offended me. I consider myself humiliated and

insulted ; and I shall find forgiveness a difficult virtue to exercise on behalf of a perverse and ungrateful child, such as you have proved yourself to be ! ”

Mr. Branscombe opened his conversation with Stella later in the evening, after Valentine had left and when Augusta and Hortensia had gone to bed, with this exordium majestically delivered and very sincerely felt.

“ Papa, what would you have had me do ? ” cried Stella, her courage drowned in despair at this litany of reproaches from her father, once so blindly worshipped and still so fondly loved, if not so wholly believed in as before.

“ I would have had you wise, modest and obedient,” he answered, fixing his eyes on her with a frown. “ I would have had you accept Mr. Valentine Cowley’s exceedingly desirable proposals, and marry the man of your father’s choice.”

“ Without loving him, papa ? ”

“ Without rubbishing sentiment, without selfish consideration, without unmaidenly proclivities, and without the rootless fancy of your own silly imagination,” he answered angrily. “ Had you been the Stella of old days, the Stella of my hope, you would have trusted your happiness, like your mind, your will, your

heart, your head, your love, to me ; you would have let me regulate your life as the best architect of your fortune, and you would have found what I had done, well. Who so good a guide for his child as a loving father, with experience and a mind to comprehend life all round ? I know you ; and I know that exceedingly excellent young man. It was the marriage of all others most suitable, most desirable. I planned and arranged for it ; and you have wilfully disappointed and, I may say, deceived me."

"No, papa, I never deceived you !" interpolated Stella.

"You are no longer my Stella," continued Mr. Branscombe, not heeding her. "You are to me as a changeling ; and henceforth you must live as an exile from those deepest recesses of my heart where hitherto you have had your home !"

"Papa, do not say that !" cried Stella, covering her face.

"You have elected, and you must take the consequences," he answered coldly.

"But why do you want me to marry at all ? Why do you want it ?" then said the girl, suddenly looking up with a curiously scared expression. What did she think ? What sus-

pect? What foresee? "Only a short time ago you would not hear of it, and now—why do you want to force me? I love Cyril Ponsonby," she went on to say in a strange, reckless way; "and I do not care in the least for Mr. Cowley. Yet you made me break with the one and now you want me to take the other. I cannot understand it; nor why you should be so angry with me because I have not accepted a man I do not care for, when"—she stopped herself in time. It was not necessary to repeat her confession of faith within so short a time.

"I loved you too well to give you to that very ordinary young boor, Mr. Cyril Ponsonby," cried Mr. Branscombe; "and it was because I loved you that I wished you to marry Mr. Cowley—in every way your equal and fit match. Is that such a difficult problem to you, Stella?"

"But I do not want to marry any one," said Stella.

"And I wish that you should marry some one—and soon," said her father sternly.

She looked at him with her large eyes, dark and frightened.

"Papa," she said slowly; "do you want to get rid of me?"

“I wish you to marry, and to marry well,” he repeated evasively.

She burst into a passion of tears.

“Oh, this is too much!” she cried in her bitter anguish of despair. “You took me from Cyril to be your comfort and companion, and now you want me to leave you! You have broken my heart twice over, papa—I who have only loved you better than myself—better, too, than Cyril.”

“Cyril! Cyril!” said Mr. Branscombe, now thoroughly roused and forgetting even to pose. “Hear me, Stella. I command you never to repeat that name in my presence again. You degraded yourself by your love for that young man in the beginning; you degrade yourself doubly by what I suppose you would call your constancy now. Let this end. You have chosen, and I will say dared, to reject the choice which I had made for you. So be it. You will have to learn the mistake that you have so wilfully made. But I will not have a daughter of mine openly profess her love for a man who has definitely cast her off as this Ponsonby has cast off you. Foolish, obstinate, undutiful you may be and are; but immodest, by heavens, no!—this is more than I can bear! Do you think that precious little virginal angel,

Hortensia Lyon, would act as you act? Take counsel by her sweet example, and let your shame lead you to the higher levels of repentance and the refined paths of maiden modesty.”

And with this Mr. Branscombe took up his chamber candlestick and went off to his own room—one of the rare times in his life when he was absolutely in earnest, if by no means beautiful or poetic.

Meanwhile, Stella sat in the deserted sitting-room, stunned and terrified; feeling as if the very earth had given way and that the solid things of life had become floating and insecure; as if all happiness had died for ever, and that her father was sitting on the tomb where her still living Love lay buried. And the only person at the back of her consciousness, of whose approval she was sure, was her good friend Randolph—Brother Randolph—brother now more than ever!

Valentine, humiliated and sore, too pure and honest a gentleman to seek in dissipation relief from pain yet unable to live among the broken fragments of his shattered hopes and mutilated pride, started off to Highwood and the Pennefathers. There at least he would have “fun” and such distraction as this included. There he could not be poetical nor

moody nor aught but “jolly” and “all there” as they said. And Gip was a good girl and thoroughly healthy-minded. And then came the question which he did not see was prompted by his wounded pride: “Was it all sincere? Did I not fancy myself more in love than I really was? Was Stella Branscombe so Supreme as I thought her? Did I not exaggerate my own feelings, spurred on by her coldness rather than by any living passion in myself? Was it not rather the desire to distance a rival memory than spontaneous love on my own part?—and am I not on the whole well out of it?”

He asked himself these questions honestly and clearly; and he answered them as honestly—at least so he thought. “Yes; he was well out of it.” But if he were, he had a singularly harassed look for a man just escaped from a danger; and any one would have said that, instead of escape, he had had a fall, and a heavy one. And indeed all the Sherrardine people did say so, each in his own manner, as they received him with an effusiveness of welcome which made him feel like the Prodigal Son restored to his own and regaled with the fattest of the fattest calves in the stalls. They fairly raved at him for his queer looks; and suggested all kinds of absurd explanations—all save Gip, and she by a rare

accession of tact, an almost intuitive perception of thin ice, strangely foreign to her general nature, said nothing. But perhaps she noted more than the others; certainly she guessed nearer the truth.

Once only did she touch the secret sore, and then with the lightest, kindest, deftest fingers in the world. As she and Val were strolling over the lawn one evening after dinner, she turned her face up to his and said in a voice softer than hers in general, and one that slightly trembled in spite of herself:

“Val, you have come here out of tune, old man; but, remember, you have come among chaps who really love you without humbug or palaver. So you just paddle your own canoe in your own way, till you are all square again. No one shall bother you; and I’ll take care that no one shall chaff you; and I will never ask what it is.”

The genuine kindness, the substantial delicacy of this queer, rough speech, overcame Val.

“Come with me into the shrubbery, out of sight of the windows, Gip,” he said, his voice too slightly trembling, and his manner a strange mixture of headlong excitement and almost ferocious melancholy. “Whatever is amiss with me you can cure—and you only.”

Whereupon they plunged into the dark depths of the shrubbery, and there words were said which left Gip radiant as a sunbeam and Val like a thundercloud traversed by unwholesome lightning. They were words spoken once for all; and words which would be stuck to. And if the mother at home, in that stately place in Warwickshire, did not like them, so much the worse for her. But that would not affect the position of her future daughter-in-law. The rejected heart had been caught at the rebound, and Georgie Pennefather held the prize.

"Something has gone wrong," she said to her sister when she told her the news at night; "but, Patrick, I will never, never, never ask what it is! I am engaged to him now and I am far too jolly to whine about old scores."

"Right you are, George," said Pip between laughing and crying, kissing and sobbing; "but oh, mercy me! whatever shall I do without you! Oh, George, I shall go dead when you have gone! Val will have to marry me, too!"

"You'll get a Val of your own, Patrick, and then you'll not mind," said Gip soothingly.

But the pretence was too patent; and the two Doves sobbed and kissed each other alternately—Gip's long-desired engagement to that dear old chap, that nice old man, Val Cowley, having, strange to say, its drawbacks!

CHAPTER XII.

LOVE'S SHADOW—HATE.

THE cure of the boy was now complete and Augusta had to return home. Not many letters had passed between her and her mother; and those which had been written were all on the daughter's side. The terrible old woman was a bad scribe at the best; and of late her bodily activities in every direction had noticeably decreased, so that she laid aside all exertion which she was not absolutely obliged to undergo. Certainly she laid aside that quite unnecessary work of supererogation—a correspondence with her daughter; and only grunted in her peculiar manner, with less pleasure than doubt and critical distaste, when she received one of Augusta's letters, largely written, fluent in word, flowing in form, and telling substantially nothing;—not even telling the important fact

that Sandro Kemp and his cousin Ethel White were in the same hotel as themselves; that they all went out together to that memorable Castle, and on to the crimson sunset-lighted sands; and that words had been spoken there which could never be recalled, and by which the whole history of life had been changed for both mother and daughter.

All this had to wait until affairs were somewhat arranged; when Augusta would say it face to face and take the consequences bravely. She knew what those consequences would be, and she did not see the wisdom of anticipation and prematurity.

Her heart light, her winsome face beautified by her inner joy, her pleasant laugh clear as silver bells, Augusta returned to the home which had been essentially her prison, as one fortified by a charm from all evil present and to come. The old woman, keen as a hawk to see all changes in the world around her, caught almost at a glance the new spirit which sat like a crown on her daughter's head.

"What is it?" she asked herself. "What has she done, or what is she going to do? She has done something; and I must find out what it is."

But she said nothing on that first evening.

She thought she would wait for an opening and, when that was made, then she would enter and put all to the rout. That unknown Something which ailed her had been rather troublesome of late; and when that was troublesome her temper generally followed suit, as those who formed her household knew to their cost. Meanwhile she sat in her easy-chair, with her heavy old eyebrows lowered over her small keen eyes, watching her daughter's brightened face with its radiant crown of secret joy as her cat might have watched a bird on the lawn, waiting for the moment when it should come near enough for that fatal spring to be made.

The next day passed as this first evening had done. Augusta said little about what had happened at St. Ann's and nothing at all about Sandro Kemp. For she, like her mother, was waiting on opportunity and the fit moment and would not open the bag before the run for the creature within was open and assured. But the silence of suspicion on the one side and of reserve on the other, made itself felt between them as the dead stillness of the coming storm presages the furious outbreak at hand.

It was Sunday. All Highwood had assembled as usual in the church-porch after service,

where the returned travellers were greeted with as much animation of welcome as if they had been to the North Pole and had come back laden with sealskins and free of frostbites. Every one was, what the slang of the day calls, "in good form," and the elixir of life ran bright and clear for each and all. The Doves were especially beaming and resplendent; their saucy faces were all over dimples; their bold black roving eyes shone like highly polished spheres of ebony set in ivory; and Gip, re-transformed from her late sharp and spiny larva to something even beyond her old buoyant, breezy, butterfly self, was what she would have called a jolly good fellow to all the world and in splendid case all round. To Stella Branscombe, to whom she had been so cruel and spiteful in the dark days gone by, now that she knew her jealousy to be a mere ghost of which she held the substance, she was like the most affectionate sister. It seemed as if she tried to make up for her ill-humour and roughness by a corresponding excess of sweetness and fellowship.

"Dear Stella! how prime you look!" she said, in her clear, ringing tones, squeezing the girl's hand till she nearly made her cry out with pain. "How awfully jolly to have you back

again and to see your dear little face look a mite more round and rosy than it did! You're not quite up to your old self yet, but you are not such a peaky lank as you were by miles. It was so awfully nice to see you in your old place again!—I declare I could not say my prayers as I ought for looking at you!”

“And I am glad to see you look so well, Georgie,” answered Stella, smiling in her sweet way; a little surprised at the exuberance of this greeting, but glad that the cloud had passed and that Georgie Pennefather had “come out of the sulks,” as Georgie herself would have called it.

“Oh! Patrick and me, we are always tight as trivets!” said that slangy, fast, objectionable young person, laughing and looking at her sister significantly; and Pip, taking up the cue, laughed and gave back the significant look with interest, shouting as her reply:

“George is tighter than any trivet, ain't you, George?”

“Rather,” said the twin Dove, a wild outburst of irrepressible hilarity tumbling from her lips like a cascade of jocund waters.

“And how was old Sandro Kemp, Augusta?” asked Gip when she had done with Stella. “Val told us what a jolly little party you made.

Val came here, you know, a little while after he left St. Ann's, and gave us all the news. Fancy old Sandro and that Mrs. White with you! What larks!—jam for some one I should say, Augusta, should not you?" with impudent merriment—"poking fun" at the end of a quarter-staff.

Colonel MoneyPENNY, who had been speaking in a low voice and with manifest gallantry to the fair widow, caught the hated name as a man catches the echo of a challenge. He stiffened himself as if on parade and fixed his fiery eyes on Augusta's, asking her in plain language—if looks can be called plain language—"What did it mean?" and had it been the "jam" of the Pennefathers' vernacular to have had Sandro Kemp's society at St. Ann's?

He looked in vain. That waxen mask of mindless amiability for which Augusta Latrobe was famous, came over her face like a shadow, hiding the truth and her soul beneath the vacant sweetness which was her favourite weapon of defence.

"It was very pleasant to have them there," she answered. "Mr. Kemp is always good-natured, and Mrs. White"—"That was Cyril Ponsonby's chum," shouted Gip parenthetically—"Mrs. White is a very remarkable kind of

woman," continued Augusta, not noticing the parenthesis.

"What way?" asked Gip, elliptical when she was not vulgar, and ungrammatical always.

"She is a thorough Anglo-Indian," said Augusta, as if this were an explanation.

"And flirts like fun all round," cried Gip.

Augusta laughed that vacant, mindless little laugh of hers which meant nothing.

"Why, she tried it on Val, who hated her, and on old Kemp as well!" said Gip. "But Val said that didn't run! Old Kemp knew better than that; and so did some one else, didn't they, Augusta?"

"Mr. Kemp did not flirt with her, so far as I could see," answered Augusta, with that kind of crass literalness which makes an effectual barrier against further conversation; at least with most people. It did nothing with Georgie Pennefather.

"But if he did not with her, he did with some one else," she said in a loud whisper; "and from what Val said we may be looking out for orange-blossoms in good earnest this time. Oh, you sly-boots! oh, my! Augusta! Those spoons, then, were true; and you looking all the time as if butter would not melt in your mouth!"

Augusta laughed again. It might be in deprecation or in acceptance of the charge, who can tell? Not even Colonel Moneypenny watching her so closely, nor Dr. Quigley, who was watching both.

"I was not aware that Mr. Kemp was one of your party," the Colonel then said slowly, his face livid, his deep-set eyes burning like two coals blazing from among the ashes.

"No?" answered Augusta, her eyes raised to the level of his cravat, not beyond. "He came there with his cousin a week after we went."

"And stayed there all the time?"

"Yes; we left them still there," she answered with the prettiest air of girlish frankness and most admirably-acted indifference.

"When is it to be, Augusta?" asked Gip.

"When is what to be, Georgie?" answered the widow.

"Orange-blossoms and old Kemp," laughed that saucy minx.

"Ah, when?" said Augusta. "I will tell you, when you wear your orange-blossoms for Val Cowley!" she added, drawing her bow at a venture—Stella with her father and the rest of the Highwoodites being a little in advance and quite out of hearing.

"I'll take you at your word!" shouted Gip, as she and Pip, laughing like two mad creatures, rushed off down the lane which led from the high road to Sherrardine.

"She had you there, George," laughed Pip. "I wonder if she knows!"

"Oh, it was only a fluke!" said Gip. "But who cares? It'll have to be told soon; I don't care how soon; and I don't care who knows, do you, Patrick?"

"No, I am too awfully jolly about it to want to keep it dark," said Pip; and her sister answered frankly: "So am I."

Too much or too little had been said for the Colonel's peace. It was or it was not; and in any case he must know which. Fortunately he had not committed himself; fortunately for his dignity he had not made that offer which more than once had been so near and which a merciful Providence had always prevented. But he must know the truth. For his own sake he must be put in possession of facts as they stood; and if Mrs. Latrobe would not confide in him of her own free will, he must force her hand as he had tried in vain to do once before. But this time something told him that he should be more successful.

"You were much with your old friend?"

he began, in his thin rasping voice, as the main body of Highwoodites moved along the highroad.

"Yes, very much," said Augusta with her most inane smile.

"And he was as charming as ever?" returned the Colonel.

"I did not see any difference in him," she said.

"You were always his advocate, I remember," said the Colonel.

She smiled again.

"Yes? Was I?" she replied; adding: "What a lovely day this is!"

"Where does Mr. Kemp live now? And what does he do since he came into his fortune?—that fortune of which, by all accounts, he stood so much in need?" asked the Colonel.

"He has been away," she said; "and I do not know what he does."

"No? You do not know what he does? That is strange;" he returned with satirical emphasis.

"Is it?" she replied good-temperedly. "How beautiful those distant hills are!"

"You are glad to return to your old home?" said the Colonel, suddenly changing front and speaking with tenderness as little disguised as his bitterness had been.

"Home is always home," was the safe rejoinder.

"And you will not leave us again?"

"My trunks are not packed," she returned with a sweet little smile.

"You will stay here for ever among us? We miss you so much when you go!"

The Colonel spoke with still more pronounced tenderness. All the same his eyes were blood-shot and fiery and his smile was more acid than sweet.

"You are very good," she returned.

"I should like to keep you for ever," said the Colonel. "Do you remember how happy we were that stormy day, when my house was your shelter?"

"When was that?" said Augusta, as if considering. "Oh, yes! I remember now. I took shelter in your house from the snowstorm. What a dreadful day it was!"

"My house was then a real shelter?" he asked in a lowered voice.

"Well, the snow did not come in through the roof, so I suppose it was!" said the widow lightly. "What a contrast between that day and this!"

"That was the happier for me," said Colonel Money Penny.

"You like winter best? I like spring and summer," she said.

"And the sea-side better than the inland country?" he asked.

Augusta put on her mask close and tight.

"Sometimes," she said with the very sublimity of vacuity. "It all depends."

"On what?"

"On the weather," she answered, holding out her hand as they came up to The Laurels. "Good-bye, Colonel Moneypenny. Good-bye, dear," to Stella, who was walking with Randolph Mackenzie. "Take care of yourself, dear child," she added with tenderness.

Stella whispered: "Has he found out?" and by her whisper, which he could not hear, excited the man's suspicion and jealousy afresh.

All that night Colonel Moneypenny lay awake, half mad with this jealousy, this suspicion, which burned like fire and ran like poison in his veins. Baffled as he had been, he was far from being convinced that Augusta's apparent unconcern was real, and he determined to have it out. Cost what it might, his self-respect demanded that he should know the truth. Wherefore, full of this determination, he went to The Laurels the next day, as he had done once before, prepared to dig the pit

into which the woman, for whom his love so often took the form of love's shadow—hate—should fall; this time never to rise again.

The greetings were given and all the proper formalities of preliminary courtesy were gone through, even more punctiliously than usual. It was the salute of the duellist, the hand-shake of the prize-ring after the caps have been thrown down to show that they are “there.”

“What kind of person is Mrs. White?” asked the Colonel, turning to Augusta and speaking suddenly.

“In what way?” replied the widow, the colour beginning to mount into her face very slowly, very quietly, but unmistakably; “in beauty or character?”

“Both,” he said.

Mrs. Morshead looked a little lost.

“What Mrs. White?” she asked.

“Mr. Kemp's cousin,” said Augusta, as steadily as if she had said Tony's new hat. Then, to give the conversation a turn, if possible, she added: “She is the person about whom and Cyril Ponsonby all that gossip was made in the winter.”

“It was odd, was it not, that she should have gone to St. Ann's without her husband, and only escorted by a man like Mr. Kemp? Cousin or not, that was a little queer, I think.”

Colonel Moneypenny said this with his well-known acid smile—that smile which, more than all else, expressed the burning passion that he did his best to conceal.

“They have been brought up together, and are like brother and sister; and Captain White is in India,” said Augusta, neither faltering nor quailing for all that her mother’s eyes were fixed on her with ominous surprise, with sharp suspicion and with the very darkness of latent wrath.

“Nevertheless it argues a large amount of trust in Captain White,” said Colonel Moneypenny, still smiling in his sharp, acid way. “He could not have known that you would have been there to act as a—what shall I say? I cannot say chaperon, but rather as a counter-charm, a more powerful attraction.”

“He probably knew both his wife and his cousin, when he sent Ethel home,” replied Augusta, tranquilly as to manner, but the tell-tale flush had deepened now to burning crimson on her face.

“What does all this mean?” asked Mrs. Morshead. She had been sitting in her chair, stiff and upright as if she had been cased in iron; her eyebrows nearly meeting, and her eyes almost concealed beneath their shaggy

fringe. "Was that sign-painter, Sandy Kemp, at St. Ann's, Augusta?"

"Yes, mamma," answered her daughter.

"And you spoke to him?"

"Yes."

"Were good friends with him?—as if nothing had happened?" asked the mother.

Colonel Money Penny laughed in a forced, affected, rasping kind of way.

"Quite good friends and something more, if report speaks true!" he said with pretended lightness. "Come now, confess, Mrs. Latrobe, was it not so?"

"Really, Colonel Money Penny, your question is too enigmatical either to answer or understand," said Augusta, she also laughing with affected lightness.

"Don't be hypocritical, Augusta," said her mother savagely. "Colonel Money Penny is quite easy to understand; and you know he is; and answer that question directly: Were you good friends with Sandy Kemp, and something more?"

The young widow looked at her mother, and from her to her former lover now her bitterest enemy. She was not defiant, not insolent, but she was calm and strong as if prepared for all encounters. She seemed to draw her graceful

figure somewhat together, as if she stiffened her shoulders and strengthened her neck to bear—and to bear triumphantly.

“Yes,” she said, in a low, clear voice; “we *are* good friends—friends and something more, for life.”

Colonel Moneypenny's livid face grew as pale as the face of a dying man; then the blood came back into his thin, worn cheeks as if a hot flood of fire poured through his veins.

“I thought so!” he said in a suffocated voice. “I knew it months ago!”

“Then you knew what I did not,” said Augusta. “Our meeting at St. Ann's was by chance.”

“You sit there, Augusta, and quietly tell me that you love that impudent fellow?” asked Mrs. Morshead, with portentous stillness.

“Yes, mamma, I do; I am sorry that you do not. You would if you would but let yourself know him,” answered her daughter.

“You are going to marry him?”

“Yes, mamma.”

“Then before Colonel Moneypenny I say it, you leave my house to-day—you and your boy. No second wife shall darken my doors with her shameless sin; and I would rather see a daughter of mine in her grave than the wife

of Sandy Kemp. You have chosen between him and me, Augusta. Go to your precious bargain, and never let me see your face again! You are no daughter of mine, and never have been!"

"Mrs. Morshead!" remonstrated the Colonel.

His revenge had a little over-stepped itself. He had wanted to punish the woman, whom once he had loved, but not to this extent. This retribution was too savage, too severe, even for such an offence as hers, and for such revenge as his.

"Do not plead for me, Colonel Money Penny!" flashed out Augusta, turning round on him with one of her rare outbursts of passion. "Leave my mother and me to settle our own affairs by ourselves. Be satisfied with what you have already done, and leave the rest alone. You have revenged yourself enough."

He started to his feet.

"I might have done more," he said cruelly: "and were I not a gentleman and a man of honour, I would."

She shrugged her shoulders with a disdainful gesture. That was her sole answer to his assertion of gentleness and honour.

"If you have more to say, say it out, Colonel Money Penny," said Mrs. Morshead, who, in this

little passage at arms, secretly sided with her daughter, liking her spirit.

“Madam,” said the Colonel grandly; “I respect your age too much to afflict you more than you are afflicted already; and to your daughter I leave the stings of her own conscience. Good-day, madam, and accept my sympathy; you need it.”

With no word of adieu to Augusta, he turned and left the room, leaving the mother and daughter together and alone.

“Now, Augusta,” said Mrs. Morshead, as the house-door shut against the young widow’s foe; “you know what is before you; you don’t sleep another night in this house, neither you nor your boy. So go and pack, and never dare to cross this threshold again. If I want you I will send for you; but I think I would rather die by the road-side than do that. No, don’t come near me, Augusta. I don’t want to wish you good-bye. You have deceived me all through, and now I have done with you and yours for ever. Go; and don’t come back to take leave; only let me know that you have gone and that I shall never see you again.”

“Mamma!” said Augusta in a pleading voice.

“If you do not want me to lay my curse on

you, Augusta—a mother’s curse, a dying woman’s curse—leave me now and for ever!” almost shouted Mrs. Morshead, carried out of herself by passion. “Leave me, you bad, ungrateful, shameful girl! Would that you had never been born!”

So Colonel Money Penny’s work had not been quite fruitless to-day, and Love’s shadow—Hate—had fallen in good truth with power across the young widow’s path.

Presently Mrs. Morshead rang the drawing-room bell twice, sharply.

“Take me to bed, Martha,” she said feebly, when her maid appeared. “Take me to bed, hussy. I have had my death-blow.”

CHAPTER XIII.

AS HIGH AS HIS HEART.

MR. BRANSCOMBE was sitting on the seat under the cedar-tree on the lawn. He was turned sideways to the house, and thus looked down the grounds towards the Lodge and the road. It was odd to see him sitting there alone. In all her experience Stella did not remember such a strange departure from his normal habits. She remembered to have seen him there with her mother. She herself had sat with him there; but that this solitude-hating father of hers should have gone out and deliberately placed himself under the cedar-tree alone was strange indeed.

Laying aside her present work—she was painting a bouquet of roses on a length of white velvet to be hereafter made into a sachet, scented with attar of roses, for his shirts—she

went out to him, timidly. She had become timid in these latter days—timid because he was relentless and cold, unforgiving and displeased. Since Val's rejection by her and public betrothal to Georgie Pennefather, the relations between the once idolizing daughter and the fondly receptive father had been strained almost to the breaking point and chilled almost to the freezing. Nevertheless, in the foolish way of loving women, she tempted Providence and defied probabilities, and went out to her father sitting there alone on the seat under the cedar-tree on the lawn—where she used to sit so often with Cyril in the happy days of long ago—though if she had stopped to reflect she would have known that the chances were she would be snubbed for officiousness and made to feel unwelcome.

“You here alone, dear papa! I do not like to see you alone!” she said with a caressing accent and a coaxing smile, both sadly dashed by fear.

“Alone!” he answered with mock mournfulness; “alone! When am I ever aught but alone?”

To Stella it seemed that, what with Hortensia Lyon as his constant chorus, Randolph Mackenzie as his obedient copyist, and the whole

visitable world of Highwood for ever flowing through his gates, this dear father of hers was not much alone when you came to think of it and sum up the whole matter. But she was wise enough not to say this. She only smiled again with a timid, coaxing kind of air, as she said :

“May I stay with you now, papa?”

He turned his grey eyes on her slowly.

“As my companion?” he replied. “But companionship includes sympathy; and the only sympathy possible between a father and daughter is in the unlimited obedience of the latter to match the tender prevoyance of the former. By your act of disobedience you have severed that bond of sympathy which once existed and which should have always existed between us. Will your presence, your bodily presence, Stella, free me from the spiritual loneliness which oppresses me?”

“Are you never going to forgive me, papa?” pleaded the girl, tears in her eyes.

“My dear Stella,” he answered; “all actions bear their logical consequences. It is not a question of voluntary forgiveness, or of intentionally nursed wrath to keep it warm on my part. You have done a certain action and the consequences are so-and-so — as necessary, as

logical, as inevitable as if you had put your hand into the fire and thus had burned your flesh. Let me hear no more childish folly about 'forgiveness.' It is fate, logic, circumstance, necessity, that we should discuss; because it is fate, logic, circumstance, necessity, under which we live, not the nursery puerilities of a little child who breaks her doll without knowledge or design—then asks to be forgiven for what is not a fault. Your action was not this, my dear Stella. Your action was deliberate and foreseeing disobedience to my will. The logical consequence therefore, is my paternal displeasure and the solution of continuity in our amicable relations."

"Papa! I did not think you could have been so cruel!" cried Stella, the very passion of despair in her voice.

"Had you not better return to the house, my dear Stella?" said her father with frosty civility and a deadly kind of courtesy. "Would you not think it well to resume such occupations as you might have been engaged in? I wish to reflect and meditate on a certain course of action on my own part, and I desire to be left in solitude—the solitude to which you yourself have doomed me."

On which Stella, obedient and dejected, went

back into the drawing-room ; but she put away that square of white velvet and her jar of roses, and did no more to-day to that sachet, scented with attar of roses, which she was painting for her dear papa's fine-worked shirts. The spirit had gone out of her hand, and she could as little have drawn the forms or laid the colours as she could have sympathized with her father's thoughts, had she known them, as they buzzed like bees beneath the cedar-tree and drew themselves across his brow like long lines of light traversing the darkness.

His sainted Matilda among the angels in heaven and therefore of no use to him here on earth—Stella, a disappointment and worse ; by no means now the Star of his Home in whose pure rays he was to find comfort, guidance and companionship, but a very uncomfortable and shabby little farthing rushlight which served only to make the surrounding darkness more visible—Randolph Mackenzie, a mere bit of human mechanism, a cleverly-constructed grub, good for a certain amount of caligraphic ability and good for nothing else—the fount of his genius drying up for want of that praise and devotion, that loving flattery, that stimulating absorption which made its only real source—Mr. Branscombe had but one shrine to which

to turn, one rock by which to anchor. Let the world say what it would, he had resolved. He had his own life and comfort and genius to think of first of all things. Let the herd rave. Is not a poet superior to such ravings? and must not Egeria be his chief care? So he had resolved, as has been said; and the moment for putting his mental determination into deeds had come. Presently Stella saw her father get up from his seat and walk across the lawn. His gait and air had something in them more than usual—a curious blending of the majesty and courtesy, the grace and dignity for which he was famous, with a haste, an eagerness not often shown at all and never so strongly marked. Then she saw him lift his broad-brimmed hat and stand uncovered in the sunshine, as he took Hortensia's hand and drew it within his arm, bending his handsome head as if speaking in low tones while they walked slowly back across the lawn to the seat beneath the cedar-tree from which he had just risen—that seat on which so much of the Branscombe family life had been transacted.

"She here again! Why! she was here this morning!—and she did not tell me she was coming again this afternoon. I cannot bear it much longer! I know I shall quarrel with her," said Stella to herself, colouring with vexation.

Then she turned pale and shivered with something more serious than vexation, as her eyes were fixed with a kind of fascination on her father and her friend.

“Child, do you know that you have grown?” said Mr. Branscombe in his most dulcet tones, as he placed Hortensia on the seat and drew her close to his side, so close that she leaned against his arm—which was what she liked.

The little Puritan, feeling that something was in the air, was pale and trembling, not knowing whether she ought to feel frightened or elated, hopeful or despairing. What was the meaning of this exordium? Had she grown beyond her place of supplementary daughter? of youthful Egeria? of childlike chorus and artistic shield-bearer?—and was she therefore to be banished? Had Stella’s jealousy been too much for her, and was she to suffer from it in the diminution, if not total cessation, of the friendship which made her life’s joy and was her crowning honour, and without which it seemed to her that her days would become a dull dead blank scarce worth the trouble of traversing? What did this sublime and lovingly-adored man mean by her having grown?—that she had outstretched her precious privileges?

"Grown?" she repeated, her voice a little unsteady; but she did her best to keep her manner natural and as if unconcerned. "No; I have not grown, dear Mr. Branscombe; not for the last year. And at all events," she added, her pale lips forcing themselves to smile; "I hope that I have not grown beyond your affection or my dear old place at Rose Hill."

"Yes; you have grown within this last year; and you have grown beyond your place at Rose Hill," said Finery Fred in a low soft voice—how often used before in life!—stooping his head to look into her face and smiling at her fear, at her pretence of calmness, at her girlish nervousness altogether. "You have grown indeed—'as high as my heart,' Hortensia! Grown into my heart I may say; grown so closely one with myself that I cannot live without you—that the days are dull when I have not you as my rosy-fingered dawn, my noonday sun, my evening star—grown round me as the ivy round the oak, so that I cannot be separated from you. And now I ask you to leave your home and come to mine—to tell me that I may count on your devotion and companionship to the end of my days—to assure me, with that refined and gracious little mouth whose delicate

curves are real enchantment to me, that you will never leave me again. Will you, sweet child?"

Again the girl was uncertain of his meaning. Was this an offer of marriage or of adoption? She did not know; and truth to say, for herself she did not care which it might be. She only knew that the dearest wish of her heart was to be able to devote herself to Mr. Branscombe—to live with him always and never leave him; but it was all one to her whether she were his wife or his daughter so long as her position was secure and her devotion had free outlet.

"There is nothing on earth that would make me so happy as to dedicate my life to your service," she said, raising her eyes to his with almost religious exaltation of worship shining in them.

For though she was silly to excess, and in some sense artificial, she was terribly in earnest in her admiration for this imposing bit of froth and foam, this sham Apollo, this pasteboard Jupiter in whom she believed throughout, and whom she loved and revered in equal proportions.

"But have you foreseen consequences?" Mr. Branscombe went on to say. "If friends deride? If home influences interfere with this sweet

union of our souls, can I count on holding you contrary to the will of your parents? Loving you, child, as I do, can I be the one all-sufficient in your life? Ought I ask for so much from you?”

“Oh, Mr. Branscombe!” said Hortensia in frank agony; “you will not let any one divide us after to-day? You will not send me away again after having opened your house to me? You will let me live with you, whatever any one says?”

She laid her clasped hands on his shoulder. It was with an effort that she did not fling herself across his breast.

For answer, Mr. Branscombe put his arm round her waist—there, in full view of the house; Stella, standing just within the open frame of the window, irresolute whether to go and speak to her friend—or to her who was assumed to be her friend—or whether to stay quietly where she was and let the two manage by themselves what seemed somewhat important business. His arm round her waist, in full view of the house; of Stella, undecided what to do and full of secret trouble; of Jane Durnsford, watching from poor dear Mrs. Branscombe’s room for what she had long expected; of Jones and the rest of the servants, peeping from the

staircase windows; of the gardener and the gardener's lad, peering from behind the laurustinus bushes in the shrubbery;—there, in full view of earth and sky, of man and the gods, Mr. Branscombe once more stooped his lordly head, and this time kissed the girl long and tenderly on her trembling lips.

“My kiss of consecration,” he said grandly. “The kiss which claims you as my child-wife.”

“Oh! if you mean to marry me, no one *can* divide us,” said Hortensia naïvely, smiling with the happiness of relief from dread, as her fears were now at rest. Adoption, with a father and mother of her own alive, might have been difficult, but marriage was an honourable state; and she was secure.

Womanlike, even at this supreme moment, she glanced timidly towards the house and saw Stella standing within the window-frame, looking at them. Even at this distance the whiteness of her face and the darkness of her eyes were visible; and her whole look and attitude suggested an avenging spirit.

“Oh!” cried Hortensia in genuine terror. “Stella has seen!”

“Sweet trembler! have no fear. Trust in me—I am your protector, now,” said Mr. Branscombe with tranquillizing dignity, again press-

ing her to him as if to make the whole thing more plain and evident. Turning to the house, he called out to his daughter. "Stella, come here, my dear child," he said blandly. "I have to speak with you."

Stella came forward; very slowly, very reluctantly.

To have seen her dear papa kiss Hortensia Lyon—kiss her as if he meant it—was almost as if she had seen him transformed into the likeness of the Prince of Darkness himself. It was a sin, was it not?—a crime?—something to grow hot and cold over, to blush for, to be ashamed of, to tremble at? What could it mean? Why should he kiss Hortensia Lyon, who was not his own child?—he, that fastidious and delicate-minded papa who had left off kissing his own daughter, and who, not so long ago, had held a long and wonderfully-refined discourse on the grossness of personal demonstrativeness and the sweetness of absolute reticence and stillness. And now he was kissing Hortensia Lyon on the seat under the cedar-tree, full in view of the house and its inmates!

She had found no solution to the terrible enigma by the time she had come up to the two, still sitting closely pressed together; Mr. Branscombe, with his arm round Hortensia's

waist—Hortensia, with her hands clasped in his, and their whole look and attitude eloquent of more than the mere arrangement of a new picture, the inspiration of a new poem.

Mr. Branscombe, mindful of the future fitness of things, forcibly held Hortensia to her place and prevented her rising to greet his daughter. This last came to pay homage, not to receive the courtesy of an equal; and the child-queen must know her place. But if he prevented her rising, he loosed her clasped hands, took one and laid it in his daughter's, covering both with his own.

"Love each other, my dear children," he said theatrically. "Stella, my daughter, receive your former friend as your father's sweet companion and peerless source of inspiration and joy. I present you, my dear Stella, to my child-wife—the sweetest and most sacred Egeria of my genius."

"Your wife, papa!" cried Stella, shrinking back as if she had been struck.

"My wife!" he repeated loudly, so loudly that all the listeners and peepers round heard the word.

Stella turned away abruptly, her hands clasped over her eyes and her whole being overcome with grief, passion and despair.

"Papa!" she cried after a moment's pause, taking her hands from her face and confronting them with a wild, heart-broken expression. "You say this here, where my mother lived—where she hears you now, up there, in heaven!"

"What a cruel girl you are, Stella!" sobbed Hortensia. "What has a dead wife to do with her husband's second marriage?"

"And if your sainted mother does view this scene from her home in the realms of bliss, my dear Stella," said Mr. Branscombe; "she will rejoice that I have supplemented such an unsatisfactory daughter as she bequeathed to me, with a wife made after my heart and her own model. So that calling on the name of your mother to bring distress upon your father's future wife does no good to any one, my dear Stella. It simply recoils in confusion on your own head. And now, my dear, that I have informed you of the momentous decision of the hour, I will not detain you from your avocations. Your sweet little friend will excuse you, and I give you leave to withdraw."

But if that good Matilda in the realms of bliss was so certain to rejoice at this inauspicious union of January and May, Hortensia's parents took another view of things, and one not quite in harmony with the venerable idol and his

youthful adorer. Mrs. Lyon was specially furious, though secretly not wholly displeased that events had vindicated her better judgment and that her husband was thus forced to acknowledge the superiority of her insight.

"I told you so, William, twenty times!" she said, when Hortensia, who knew better than Finery Fred how to manage her parents, had given them the startling news of her betrothal; on the hearing of which her mother had ordered her angrily from the room, her father not objecting. "You would not believe me, but I have seen it all along. I was certain of it from the very first!"

"Then if you were so certain you should have prevented it," said her husband with masculine injustice. "What was the good of being certain then, and doing nothing? And what is the good of saying all this now, when it is too late?"

Mrs. Lyon burst into those tears which mean less pain than passion, and were born less of grief for Hortensia's wayward folly than of wrath with her husband's injustice.

"That is just like you, William! Just like you men!" she said angrily. "You take all the power out of our hands and refuse to believe a word we say—spoil the children and

weaken our authority—and then you blame us when things go wrong which we might have prevented if we had been allowed. You would not let me have the smallest influence over Hortensia; and now you blame me because she has got into a disgraceful scrape and made worse than a fool of herself for life!"

"A disgraceful scrape!—No disgrace at all!" said Mr. Lyon sharply. "Disgrace? What disgrace, Cara? I am ashamed to hear you talk so! There is a little disparity in years, certainly; but where is the disgrace, I want to know, of a girl marrying a man like Mr. Branscombe? Good family, stainless reputation, more than well-to-do, fine person, unquestionable attainments—what disgrace is there in all this, I say?" he repeated, energetically drumming on the table as he warmed to his work of advocacy and defence.

"A man old enough to be her grandfather—a man years older than her father—the father of her most intimate girl-friend—his wife dead only just a year—it is horrible!—it is sacrilege!" said Mrs. Lyon shuddering.

"Pshaw! The age of the man does not signify. If it had been the other way you might have talked," said Mr. Lyon disdainfully.

"Then if I died, I suppose you would think

of marrying Stella," said Mrs. Lyon with weak sarcasm.

"More unlikely things might happen," returned Mr. Lyon, with a peculiar kind of sniff familiar to his intimates. "But there is not much likelihood of your giving me any chance," he added good-naturedly; "so we need not discuss improbable hypotheses. We have enough to do with things in hand. And after all, Cara," he continued in a softer voice, going over to his wife and laying his broad hand on her still round shoulder; "things might have been worse for the child. 'Better be an old man's darling than a young man's slave,' don't you know? and our little maid is peculiar and has fads of her own."

"Peculiar and something more!" put in Hortensia's mother in a low voice. The "peculiarities" of her daughter had so often vexed her, she was glad to be able to have her fling at them without much fear of rebuke.

"I confess I have had other views for her," Mr. Lyon went on to say, wisely not hearing his wife's undertones. "And I am disappointed more than you can be, Cara. But she has chosen for herself; and perhaps she knows what she wants better than we do. She may have done for the best. Mr. Branscombe is old and

therefore will have a gentler hand over her than Ran would have had. Ran is the best fellow in the world, but he is a bit of a bumbler when all is said and done; and our little maid has always been fastidious and over-sensitive. I know she had it at heart to make something of Ran; but, Lord, what can you do with a good honest dunderhead like that? Perhaps an artistic, musical, picture-making old fellow like Fred Branscombe, who will keep her in cotton-wool and cocker her up like a little queen, will be better for her than poor old Ran, God help him! who opens his round eyes when she goes on her high ropes, and looks as if she were talking Hebrew when she launches out about the divinity of art and the—what is her favourite word?—the preciousness, yes the ‘glorious preciousness’ of a dab of colour here or a twirligig on the piano there. No; Ran would hardly have cottoned to that, I reckon!” he said with a queer kind of laugh. “At all events,” he added in the tone of a man who has taken a resolve and means to keep to it; “at all events, Cara, it is her deliberate choice; and I won’t have her bullied. You hear me, Cara? I won’t have her bullied; and we must respect her choice.”

“Oh, William, how can you be so foolish!”

cried Mrs. Lyon. "If that child proposed murder you would sanction it! You cannot spoil her enough, it seems to me!"

"When she does propose murder and I do sanction it, then you may cry out," answered Mr. Lyon quietly. "Meanwhile the main question is—she loves that old fellow and wants to marry him. Whether it is good taste or bad, she wants to marry him. And I give my consent to the thing, and say again, I won't have her bullied;—so look where you go, Cara."

"I wish I was dead!" said Mrs. Lyon in a rage.

Whereupon the conversation ended, and Hortensia, recalled to the drawing-room, was informed by her father that she was a little fool, but that she was old enough to know her own mind and to follow out her own course. And she was to come and give him a kiss; and God bless her, and grant her happiness in the years to come! She and his youthful son-in-law would make a pretty pair and be well matched for height and age, he added, not able to resist this little fling at Finery Fred; but he hoped the dear boy would be dutiful to himself and attend to what his dear mother-in-law might have to say to him. She would probably have a great deal to say, he added with a queer smile.

With the same queer smile he hoped that Stella Branscombe would agree with her step-mother ; and that the two Queens of Brentford would not fall out about the wearing of the crown.

To all of which Hortensia answered only a few prim and respectful monosyllables. She knew her father's humour, and so long as she got her own way she did not interfere with the wording of her charter.

But when she drew herself out of his arms, and went over to kiss her mother and to receive her blessing also, Mrs. Lyon, on pretence of wiping her eyes, turned away her face till she left just the tip of her ears and the nape of her neck as the only kissable tracts ; saying, in a low voice, so that her husband should not hear :

"I cannot give you my blessing, Hortensia ! This marriage seems to me too monstrous for God or man to bless. I cannot sanction it !"

"Monstrous !" repeated Hortensia in a loud voice. "It is a marriage which God Himself has made and sanctified !"

"Now, Cara, what did I say just this minute ?" cried Mr. Lyon, guessing at the truth as Hortensia meant that he should. "No bullying and no opposition, if you please. The thing is done, and we have both—both, mind you?"—with emphasis—"accepted the situation.

There is no good in doing things by halves, and I will not spoil the cloak for the sake of the thread. So," ringing the bell; "we will drink to the health of our future son-in-law in a bottle of champagne, and long life to the happy pair!"

"That, wild horses should not make me do!" said Mrs. Lyon, bursting into an hysterical passion of tears and hurrying out of the room.

CHAPTER XIV.

NO WORSE THAN THE REST.

“I do not believe it,” said Mrs. Morshead with feeble ferocity, half raising herself from among the pillows whereby she was supported in her bed. “I do not believe a word of it, Martha! You are just cheating me with lies, like all you hussies. There was never one among you that could speak the truth.”

“No, ma’am, it is gospel truth,” answered Martha. “All the place is talking of it; and no one seems to think of anything else.”

“Then don’t tell me any more about it. I don’t want to hear of such wickednesses,” said the old woman savagely. “They ought both to go to Bridewell; that’s what I say to it; and the law should step in to prevent it. A mere baby like that and an old fellow who might be her great-grandfather—it is a shame and a sin—worse than heathen Mormonism, I declare it is! It makes me ill to think of it.”

"Well, ma'am, I'm sorry I told you," said Martha penitently. "I didn't expect you to take it to heart like that. I told you only to amuse you and pass the time."

"Then you don't amuse me, and I would rather not pass my time in such shameful thoughts," said Mrs. Morshead crossly; and Martha, who knew her, held her peace.

Presently the old woman spoke again.

"And when is the marriage to take place?" she asked quite suddenly.

"Well, ma'am, as soon as Miss Lyon can get her things together," said the maid. "They do say that Mrs. Lyon is that put out she won't lend a hand to one mortal thing, and that Miss Lyon she has no one to help her but her pa'. But then they say a heap of things here at Highwood.

"And if Mrs. Lyon is put out and won't help, she is quite in the right," snapped Mrs. Morshead; "and now go down and get your dinner."

"It's not time yet, ma'am," said Martha, who was a devoted soul and had all the nursing, night and day, on her shoulders. But they were sturdy ones; and she worked through her task without too great fatigue.

"I tell you it is," said her mistress sharply.

“Go down, I say, and don’t come back till I ring.”

“Whatever has she in her head now!” said Martha to herself as she left the room. “For most parts she can’t abear me out of her sight, and now to-day, when she’s so much weaker and looks so strange, she sends me off afore my time. Well, poor dear, the Lord’s will be done!—but He made a queer lot when He made her!”

Left alone, Mrs. Morshead shut her eyes and thought. She knew as well as Martha—as well as Dr. Quigley would have known, had she suffered him to come near her—that her end was at hand, and that the mysterious malady which had so long held and oppressed her, had now almost reached its fatal culmination. Not her days, but her hours, were numbered, and she was dying, unreconciled to her daughter. She laid there and thought; and tears began to steal silently down her withered, parched and miserable face. Presently a few sobs burst from her lips with the irrepressible impulse of bodily weakness. A board creaked in the next room—the dressing-room—belonging to this, the best room in the house—the door between the two standing very slightly ajar. The old woman dried her eyes as hur-

riedly as if her tears had been sins of which she was ashamed.

“Who is there?” she cried sharply.

There was no answer, and the boards ceased to creak. For a moment she looked anxiously to the door; then with a fresh sob, this time of disappointment, she said to herself, but not aloud: “I thought it might have been that bad girl. I think she might have come to see me when she knows how ill I am.”

She rang the bell twice, hurriedly.

Martha was by her bedside before the echoes had ceased.

“Yes, ma’am?” she said a little breathlessly. “You was a-wanting of me?”

“Martha,” said Mrs. Morshead; “who is in the next room?”

“Lor, ma’am, no one! Who should there be?” was Martha’s answer; but her heart ached when she met those wistful eyes, the secret desire of which she thought she read.

“Shut the door, then. And now go at once for my daughter,” said Mrs. Morshead. “I dare say you know where she is, though her dying mother, whom she has deserted so cruelly, does not. You are all in a plot together, you hussies, and no one knows where to have you. But go for her, and tell her to come this very

minute if she wants to see her mother alive in this world—which I dare say she does not. Go, can't you!" she said savagely.

"Yes, ma'am," said Martha, disappearing.

In another instant Augusta, without her bonnet, came into the room and went noiselessly up to the bed.

"You want me, dear mamma?" she asked quietly.

"Oh! there you are, are you?" her mother said, keeping up the old sourness of her manner—yet her poor dim eyes brightened. "So you have condescended to come at last and see your dying mother, have you? And now, are you not ashamed of yourself when you see how ill I am?"

"What is it, dear mamma?" asked Augusta anxiously.

"Cancer," was the answer, made with the invalid's odd pride in the gravity of the malady. "Cancer; that's what I have; and you as hard and indifferent all the time as if it were a mere pinprick. And all those years when I knew it was coming, and when I had it, you not caring a jot! You ought to be ashamed of yourself, if ever a daughter was," the poor old thing said, whimpering.

"I did not know. Remember, you never told me, dear mamma," said Augusta gently.

“Then you ought to have found out for yourself. Any other daughter would,” said Mrs. Morshead, her tears of weakness struggling with her temper. “And here have you left me to the care of these hussies of servants, and no one to look after anything. All the housekeeping going wrong, the butchers’ bills mounting up to goodness knows how much, the drawing-room fender and fireirons left to rust, and you, who ought to have been my right hand and seeing after everything, away no one knows where, enjoying yourself while your mother was dying. It is a shame!—a shame!” she replied with fresh tears.

“Dear mamma, I have never left you,” said Augusta softly. “I have been here all the time; watching in the dressing-room when Martha was downstairs; taking care of the house and keeping all things straight.”

“You have stayed on here of your own free will after I ordered you out of my house?” asked Mrs. Morshead, opening her eyes on her daughter and half raising herself in her bed.

At this moment she looked terrible; like an ancient Fate, twin sister of death and sin, lying there for the persecution of mankind.

“How could I leave you when you were so ill? You were taken ill on the day you told me to go,” said Augusta.

"And you stayed here of your own accord, against my orders?"

"Yes, mamma."

"Well, Augusta, I must say you are the very coolest young woman I ever met with," said Mrs. Morshead, with a curious kind of endeavour to keep up her anger against the promptings of her heart. "So, I am not mistress in my own house, am I not? I am not to be obeyed when I say that you and that troublesome little toad of yours are to go? You stay and stay and stay because I cannot see you, and disobey me as if I were a mere nobody;—upon my word—what next I wonder! And where is that little monkey of yours? And why, if you are here, have I never heard him?"

"I sent Tony away that he should not disturb you, mamma," said Tony's mother.

"And what business had you to send the poor fellow away?" snapped Tony's grandmother. "If you chose to stay why might not he too?—with a nice garden to run about in and good food to eat? You are not a very kind mother, I must say, Augusta, to keep all these good things for yourself and let that dear little boy go without."

"I was afraid he would disturb you with his noise," said Augusta again.

"I should have liked his noise," said Mrs. Morshead. "I was never so impatient with him as you were. Poor fellow," whimpering afresh; "I should like to have seen his pretty face once more."

"Shall I send for him, dear mamma?" asked Augusta.

"Send for him now—what nonsense!" was the reply. "Why should a dear little light-hearted child be brought to see an old wretch like me, like a death's-head? Send for him, no! Let things be." After a pause she asked, not opening her eyes. "Has that Sandy Kemp of yours been living here too? I should be surprised at nothing now."

"No," answered Augusta quietly.

"Where is he?—in Highwood?"

"Yes, mamma."

There was silence for a few moments, broken only by the subdued and sleepy purring of the cat lying in his accustomed place on the bed.

"Well, send for him," then said Mrs. Morshead, still without opening her eyes. "You are all mad and bad together. That's what I think of you. But you are no worse than your neighbours. With that little hussy, Hortensia Lyon, and that old fop, Mr. Branscombe, going to make a match of it, I may as well look over

your fault. So send for that sign-painter of yours, Augusta, and let us hear what he has to say for his impudent self."

"He is downstairs now, mamma," said Augusta, her colour deepening as she spoke. "I saw him come up the garden a few minutes ago. He comes every day to ask for you."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Morshead in her old dry way; "does he? I'm vastly obliged to him, I am sure. I dare say the state of my health is of great interest to him. However, if he is here without leave he may as well come up with it. So send for him, Augusta. I want to give him a little piece of my mind."

Augusta said a few words to Martha, standing outside in the passage, and she went downstairs softly. Softly too came up Sandro Kemp; but when he entered the dimly-lighted room, with its wide open window and closely-drawn green blinds, the old woman was lying quiet and silent, her eyes closed, her breathing regular, peacefully asleep. The artist came up to her bed where Augusta was standing, and hand in hand they kept watch and ward over the frail and flickering life, waiting until the poor invalid should awaken. Her long and somewhat deep-drawn breathing was, as it were, echoed by the sensually satisfied purr of the cat at her feet;

the clock ticked sharp and clear on the chimney-piece; out of doors only a few birds twittered in the shrubby bushes; and the warm, still, sultry afternoon was as peaceful as if it had been itself the court of death.

For more than an hour the two stood there watching the sleep which they half expected would never turn to waking, when suddenly Mrs. Morshead opened her eyes and looked at them both with a smile.

"I have had such a nice dream," she said; "and I declare I have no pain, Augusta! All my pain has gone like magic!"

She spoke in quite a different voice from her ordinary one; weaker, lower, but without the usual acrimony.

"I am so glad you are so much easier, dear mamma," said Augusta lovingly.

"So you are there, Sandy Kemp?" then said the old woman, fixing her eyes on the artist. "Well! you are a bold fellow, I must say, to come and stare at me like this! But you always were as impudent as you were high. I wanted to see you though. So you are going to marry my daughter, are you?"

"I hope so, Mrs. Morshead," said Sandro gently.

"And you will make her a good husband?"

"I think I can say yes to that, without even the hope," he answered with a sweet grave smile.

"You will do well by the boy, poor fellow?"

"Yes; have no fear. He will be as my own son," was the reply.

"And you expect to get all my money? Not a farthing, Sandy Kemp! Not a farthing! I have made my will, and you will not have the benefit of a single silver sixpence. If you take the girl and her boy you take them on your own hands—mind that! The boy comes in for all when he is of age; but it has to accumulate—accumulate at compound interest and you will not have a golden guinea for his schooling, or his birthdays, or anything. Now are you content with your bargain?"

The old woman had spoken very feebly, very slowly, but with perfect distinctness. Her mind was as clear as ever; only her body had gone.

"I am quite content, Mrs. Morshead. I have enough for my wife and her boy," said Sandro firmly but tenderly. "Your money was the last thing I had in my mind when I asked Augusta to be my wife; and I am glad that you have left all to her boy. He should have been my heir if he had not been yours."

"You are an impudent fellow to put us both

on a par," said Mrs. Morshead sharply; "and remember, he takes my name. He shall be no Latrobe, nor Kemp, nor rubbish of that sort. He is a Morshead; and he comes in for all because he is a Morshead. Do you hear, Augusta?"

"Yes, mamma. He shall bear your name and my father's," said Augusta.

"And keep that impudent sign-painter of yours in his proper place," said the old woman in a feeble wandering kind of way. Then she smiled and seemed to recollect herself. "No, he doesn't mean it, I dare say," she said. "I believe he is an honest man at bottom. I believe so—I believe so. Oh! this blessed freedom from pain!"

She seemed to doze a little on this, but presently she woke up again.

"Have I been a hard mother to you, Augusta?" she asked. "Sometimes I think I have been a little—have I?"

"You have been a little sometimes," answered Augusta, frankly but gently.

"And you would have been hard too, if you had had a wolf in your inside for years as I have had," said Mrs. Morshead sharply. "Then I have been a bad mother to you, Augusta?"

"No, not that, mamma."

"But hard and disagreeable—cross in fact—a peevish, scolding, cross old woman?"

"We will not think of that now," answered Augusta soothingly. "I have always loved you; and I have always known that underneath everything you have loved me."

"Yes," whimpered the poor creature pitifully; "I know that I have been bad to you. I know that I have, Augusta; and to that poor little boy, too. I rapped his pretty hands once when he had done no wrong. I know—I know. But I've made amends now; and I was always in pain, and no one knew. So perhaps you'll not mind now when you do know, for it was pain that was bad to bear. And I was hard to you too, Sandy Kemp; but I thought you came after my money as well as my daughter. Now it's over—so forgive me—forgive me," she sobbed. "Think of me gently when I'm gone!"

She said all this almost in a whisper, her glazing eyes turning slowly from each to each. Feebly she made as if to put their hands together; and when, divining her wish, they clasped them beneath hers, her dying fingers pressed them gently as a weak, wan smile flickered about her lips.

"Remember me gently when I am gone!"

she said again in a low whisper; "and pray God to forgive me my sins—and your own too," she added with one of her sudden, sharp looks—the last that ever she gave.

A long, dull silence fell on the room, broken only by the more laboured breath of the dying woman, the sleeping purr of the cat, the ticking of the clock, marking off the relentless pace of time. For the last time the old woman opened her eyes and looked up.

"Take care of Martha," she said. "The hussy has done well of me—and don't let the boy tease the cat."

Her eyes closed and a slight convulsive shiver seemed to run over her whole frame. Her breathing ceased; her jaw dropped; the last moment had come and gone. Then suddenly the cat started from his sleep, gave a loud unearthly yell, and, with his tail thick and arched, dashed off the bed and down the stairs as if pursued by a legion of fiends.

CHAPTER XV.

THE NEW ORDERING.

No one's affairs excited so much attention or sympathy at this time at Highwood as Stella Branscombe's. Georgie Pennefather's engagement with Valentine Cowley came as a matter of course and made no stir. People said: "So she has caught him at last!" and there they left it. Augusta Latrobe's future marriage with Sandro Kemp had nothing in it to cause uplifted eyebrows, shrugged shoulders or ill-natured smiles. It was so eminently suitable that no one, save Colonel Moneypenny, had a word to say in its disfavour. But Hortensia Lyon and old Mr. Branscombe—a mere child and an old fellow who ought to have been thinking of his grave and what was to come after—that was another matter altogether; and one for which no person in the place had either sympathy or respect. Taken by itself even, who could have

given a blessing to such a marriage? But when was added to this intrinsic unsuitability the thought of that poor, dear Stella, and what would become of her? and how could she be expected to get on with a stepmother younger than herself? and how shamefully she had been sacrificed throughout by that furred and frogged, curled and dyed and scented father of hers, first by her own marriage, and now by his—then the world lifted its head and hissed in its own underhand and hypocritical way. That is, it congratulated Hortensia and her elderly idol to their faces and laughed at them, when it did not vilify them, behind their backs.

The marriage took place very soon after the engagement. Anticipation disturbed Mr. Branscombe's nerves, and he was impatient to begin his new life and to get all things in order. Wherefore he declined to wait for conventional arrangements. His sweet angel, his child-wife, his Little Love, he said, did not pin her heart on millinery pomp, and she would be as happy with three frocks as thirty:—"Happier," said Hortensia meekly:—And as, according to Mr. Branscombe, "frocks" are the great barriers to feminine speed in all matters, the decision of "one off, one on, and one to spare" settled the question; and the marriage was the great

event of the day, just three weeks after that conversation on the garden-seat beneath the cedar-tree on the lawn.

During the honeymoon, which lengthened out into nearly three, nothing could exceed the kindness of the neighbourhood to Stella. Every one offered her a home, and she was made the spoiled child of the place. Augusta begged her to come to The Laurels—but then Ethel White was there, and Stella a little shrank from her; also she felt a little constrained with that sweet Augusta herself, remembering all the good advice that she had given her, and her warnings about the incoming tide, the full meaning of which she understood now though it was hidden from her then. So she said “No” to Augusta, and held on her way alone at Rose Hill.

Then the Pennefathers asked her; but Sherrardine was noisy, and the constant coming and going of Val might be an embarrassment. Wherefore Sherrardine would not do for a temporary home; nor would Derwent Lodge, though the Lyons were perhaps the most pressing of all. Mrs. Lyon had a vague idea of adopting Stella as their daughter in the place of the one who had left them; and she was unwise enough to say so. After she and her

husband had pressed the girl to go back with them to Derwent Lodge, Mr. Lyon, in his hearty, hospitable way, meaning simply what he said: "To pass the time till the happy pair came home"—the still incensed and unreconciled mother burst into tears and added:

"Yes, come home with us, dear Stella, and make it your own. Be my daughter; for I have lost my own!"

But when she said this Mr. Lyon turned round on her and rebuked her sternly, saying:

"No, no, not that, Cara. The little maid has not perhaps made the marriage that I would have chosen for her, but children marry to please themselves, not their parents; and she has only done like the rest. We did the same ourselves in our day," he added significantly. "So, although I shall be as glad to see you, my dear child"—to Stella—"as if you were a princess, I cannot countenance any nonsense about your taking our little maid's place, or that we are daughterless now. She will be always our own and our dearest; and we cannot supply her place;—and have no need to."

In the face of all this, Stella wisely thought that going to Derwent Lodge would only complicate matters already too much involved for perfect peace; and that standing as a bone of

contention between husband and wife was not exactly the happiest position in the world. Wherefore, this invitation was rejected with the rest; and the girl remained at Rose Hill with the feeling of one keeping close to an old friend about to be lost, or who at least will never be the same again.

But of all the offers of home and keep that made by Dr. Quigley was the oddest. He drove up to Rose Hill one day, to find Stella alone, as he had hoped and scarcely expected; for she was not left much to herself, and people were really very kind and rather worrying.

"Glad to see you and to find you alone," said the doctor, as he alighted from his dog-cart and came up to her as she sat reading on the lawn—but not on the seat underneath the cedar-tree. She had never sat there since the day when her father had kissed Hortensia Lyon in the face of day, and then presented her to her future stepmother. "Glad to find you alone," he repeated.

"Yes?" said Stella smiling, as she held out both her hands and looked into his face affectionately.

Dr. Quigley was a great favourite with her and she had always treated him as if he had been some sort of uncle.

"I want to make a proposal to you," he said, looking at her from under his bushy eyebrows.

"Yes?" she answered again, smiling.

The word might have been ominous to some ears; but Stella's were not sharp to detect echoes of a doubtful kind.

"I want to make a proposal," he repeated, watching her. "What are you going to do when your father comes home with your young stepmother?"

"What am I going to do?" echoed Stella. "Nothing!"

"You will live at home?"

"Surely! What else can I do?"

"You can bear it?"

"It will be very painful at the first; but where can I go?" returned Stella.

"Come to me," said Dr. Quigley. "I have a sister who is much older than I—she will come and be your chaperon if you want one; but do you come to me as my daughter. Be my child. I was your mother's nearest friend. I knew of her what no one else did. She trusted me, and there was no one in the world, and never has been one, whom I have revered, admired, worshipped as I did her." His eyes filled with tears as he said this. He stopped for a moment, unable to speak for emotion. "And you are

her child,” he then went on to say; “and because you are her daughter you are as dear to me as my own. Will you leave this house of certain sorrow, Stella, and come to me as my own prized and cherished child—my daughter, and my sister’s treasure?—for I know how dearly she will love you.”

“Thank you—I cannot say how much I thank you,” said Stella, tears in her eyes too; “but I could scarcely do that, dear Dr. Quigley. I feel your goodness more than I can express, but I could scarcely put such an affront on papa as to leave him and choose another father.”

“Ah, well, child!—if you see it in that light I have no more to say,” replied the doctor sadly. “I cannot force any one’s conscience; and of course, as you say, taking another father is a different thing from taking a husband. That you could do without remorse. Have you no kind of liking for any young man here?” he asked, thinking of Randolph Mackenzie.

“No! no!” said Stella energetically, thinking of Valentine Cowley.

“And now answer me truly—and look me in the face when you speak, Stella Branscombe!—Is your heart where it was? Do you still love Cyril Ponsonby?”

Dr. Quigley spoke slowly, almost sternly. He spoke not as a pleader, but as an inquisitor who meant to come to the truth.

"Cyril Ponsonby does not love me," said Stella evasively.

The tears in her eyes were more expressive than her words.

"That is no answer. Women, God help them; poor fools! go on loving men long after they have ceased to be loved; and you are one of that sort. You love him still?" he asked again.

"I do not love any one else," she answered.

"You love him?" he persisted.

Stella was silent for a moment. Then she turned to the old friend who was torturing her for her own good, and said gently but frankly:

"Yes, I do."

"Ah!" said the doctor briskly; "now I know where I stand and what I have to do."

Upon which he took his leave in his usual hurried and imperative way, as if suddenly ordered off by some viewless commander whose behests he must obey at all cost and all hazards; leaving Stella plunged in wonder as to where he was standing and what he meant to do.

That pleasant honeymoon in the great art-centres of Europe could not be prolonged for

ever, and the happy pair must perforce come home. It was an odd home-coming essentially, if on the surface of things everything was after the regulation pattern of bridal welcome. Flowers were set in pots along the carriage-drive, and flowers were set in vases in all the rooms; the gates and doors were thrown wide open; the servants, dressed in their Sunday best, stood waiting to welcome in the hall; Mr. and Mrs. Lyon, with Randolph Mackenzie and Stella, were at the hall-door, and all ran down the steps as the carriage drove up. Everything was as it should be; but, save in Mr. Lyon's embrace to his daughter, the heart was out of everything and it was just a mere raree-show in which no life nor soul nor meaning lay. Still, the look of things was as it should be; and no one has the right to go behind the look of things and inquire into the hidden spirit.

Mr. and Mrs. Lyon stayed to dinner; so did Randolph; and thus Stella was helped through the awkwardness of the first evening. It was only Stella who felt any awkwardness or who needed to be helped; for Hortensia was as calm and composed, as much at her ease and as much at home, as if she had been married in her cradle and had grown up on Finery Fred's knee. She was the same quiet, prim, unabashed

little Puritan as ever: but she had added a certain—not sensual, but somewhat audacious—demonstration of affection which set the teeth of all the onlookers on edge. She made as much love to her Precious Prince, as she now called her elderly idol, as if the two had been alone in their private apartments at the “Continental” or the “Grand;” and she made them all understand that henceforth her devotion to her husband would be not only supreme and undivided, but also aggressive;—that it would be flourished in their faces as an affront, a defiance to them in proportion to its intensity to him. And it was also evident that she would be jealous and exacting in all that she demanded from him, as a return for the exclusiveness of the affection given to him.

She manifestly intended to do the thing thoroughly throughout. As she had undertaken the position of an old man’s wife, she would do what she could to sink her own childishness and ape the maturity which as yet she was so far from having attained. She had bought in London a large stock of wide-frilled and exaggerated “Charlotte Corday” caps, which covered all her hair and gave her the quaintest look of masquerade imaginable. She wore a very high ruff and a Marie Antoinette

fichu; and, save in the exuberance of her idolatry for her husband—which, for all its excess, was wanting in all that sentiment which brings dew to the lip, a quiver to the eyelid, a blush to the cheek—in all that impulse of self-forgetfulness which is the crown of a woman's love—she was very prim and mortally staid and proper. Long ago she had abjured cakes and ale for her own part and had denied them to others—long ago she had set her seal against youthful follies of every kind—but she had drawn the bands of denial yet more closely since the day which had made her Finery Fred Branscombe's wife, and in the dignity of her position found even laughter an anomaly and a jest reprehensible. How intensely dignified she was to all the outside world! and how intensely she was satisfied with, and glorified by, her new husband! Language seemed unable to express her delight in her elderly plaything, her joy in her conjugal doll. She could not bear to be absent from him, nor, when in his presence, to be separated by more than a few inches from his side. At the breakfast-table the Precious Prince had to leave his long-accustomed place at the foot of the table that he might sit close to her at the head—so close that she could touch his hand when she gave him his chocolate; put her

slender fingers on his knee by way of hidden caress ; butter his toast ; take from his plate to her own the bones of his fish, of his fowl ; and turn so that she could look into his face across the angle of the table that came between them. At dinner she deserted her rightful place at the head that she might come down close to him at the foot—Stella sitting some way up the other side. In the studio she interrupted his work by her caresses, which however he did not resent—going back on what he had done as titles to honour of so much magnitude he need not repeat them, the time having come when he might rest on his laurels—but what laurels and what a rest ! Though she interrupted and cut short his activities in a fashion too delightful for him to suppress, she did not damp his æsthetic ardour nor wound his artistic susceptibilities. She fed that restless craving, which he called his genius and those who knew him best his vanity, with food at once rich, sweet, delicate—food eminently suited to his taste, and by which he was exhilarated and made content. The whole thing ran on casters and stood on velvet ; and the young wife's marriage crown of roses had but one thorn—and that thorn was Stella.

If only Stella would find herself a husband

and take herself away! Why could she not? What a wicked, disobedient, tiresome girl she was to have refused Valentine Cowley!—and why on earth should she not marry Randolph Mackenzie? He was just suited to her. He had not a poetic idea in his head, nor had she; and they would go through life in the most admirable harmony of earthworminess and intellectual vacuity. Why not Randolph? Why not, indeed!

In their wish to free themselves from the somewhat embarrassing presence of the daughter, both husband and wife agreed to a line; and Randolph got the good of the situation. He was almost as much at Rose Hill now as in the days of his secretaryship; and Stella, who was indeed stupid in these things, saw neither the designs of the authorities nor the feelings of the poor fellow himself. She only knew that it was pleasant to have her Brother with her so constantly, and that it was dull when she was left so very much alone.

For, in the house, she was always alone—cut off as completely from her father as if she were living in a brazen tower whence she only saw him in the evening walking in the garden below. Hortensia could not bear to have her in the same room with them. It seemed to

take that marriage crown of roses from her brow and to reduce her once more to plain Hortensia Lyon, here on sufferance and holding only the second place with her beloved idol. If Stella came into the studio in the morning, as at first she did and until better taught, her youthful stepmother, sitting close to the domestic Apollo whose bays she had renewed so lavishly, would lift her head from his shoulder and say in her prim way :

“Dear Stella, this place does not suit you. Dr. Quigley said so, if you remember. Precious Prince, don’t you think Stella had better not stay? The atmosphere suits *us*; but then she is not like *us*—is she?”

On which Finery Fred, who wanted his daughter no more than did Hortensia, would smile blandly and smooth his wife’s silky hair and say to Stella, not looking at her :

“My dear Stella, Mrs. Branscombe is quite right. The atmosphere here of art, flowers and perfume does not suit you; why attempt it, my dear child?”

When the two went out it was always together and Stella was left behind. Hortensia would say :

“I do not think it would look well, dear Stella, if you came with us to-day. We are

going to pay a return call"—here or there—"and it would scarcely do for you to be with us. It makes it awkward for me, such a great girl as you are now!" she sometimes added with an indescribable air of superior maturity, as if she had been a pretty wife of about thirty and Stella a lanky hoyden of sixteen, say.

So, on the days when they went to pay their return calls, or when they wanted to walk by themselves and gain inspiration, or when they had business in the town, or liked better than anything else to stay in the house, or to lounge about the garden, or to take a brisk ride deep into the country—that is, every day save Sunday—the elderly husband and his youthful wife were "in each others' pockets" as the Penne-fathers said, and Stella was left alone—or with Randolph Mackenzie.

There was another change in the girl's relations with her father which cut her to the heart; he had entirely left off kissing her. Since his first cold embrace on their home-coming, he had never touched even her forehead nor suffered her to touch his. It made his child-wife, his little angel, unhappy; and he respected her scruples of delicacy and exclusiveness. Wherefore he merely put out two fingers when he

wished his former Star good night and good morning ; and Hortensia did not do even this.

Times were indeed changed for Stella !—and it was difficult to learn her new place and to remember her lessons. One evening when the three were sitting with Randolph Mackenzie, in the drawing-room—paired off as but little more than a year ago the father and mother, the lover and his betrothed, had been paired—Stella rang the bell.

“ Why did you ring ? ” asked Hortensia, pulling the corners of her lips together.

“ For a glass of water,” said Stella simply. “ A glass of water, if you please, Jones,” she said, as the man came into the room ; but Hortensia’s tones over-ruled hers, as she too said in a decided and staccato kind of voice :

“ Jones ! a glass of water for Miss Branscombe.”

When the water had been brought and the man had come and gone, Hortensia turned to her cousin.

“ Randolph, it is time for you to go,” she said in her quiet, prim way. “ It is half-past nine.”

“ Yes, Hortensia—I mean Mrs. Branscombe,” stammered Randolph, who had been strictly tutored but who never remembered. “ I did not know that it was so late.”

"I think my good Mr. Randolph knows very little of anything at any time," said Mr. Branscombe with a lofty kind of smile—Prospero magnanimously refraining from torturing Caliban but never forgetting his brutish inferiority.

Randolph coloured.

"I know I am stupid, Mr. Branscombe," he said awkwardly.

"Never mind being stupid," said Stella naïvely. "You are good."

"What an extraordinary thing to say!" said Hortensia, putting on her most Puritanical air. "I am Randolph Mackenzie's cousin, almost like his sister, and I never paid him an open compliment like that!"

"It is not a compliment, it is the truth," answered Stella.

"Come! it is time for you to go, Mr. Randolph. Have you not heard Mrs. Branscombe's desire?" put in Mr. Branscombe impatiently. "How long do you wish to detain your young friend, my dear Stella, for the pleasure of making pretty speeches to him? Will they not keep till to-morrow?"

"Yes, papa, quite well," said Stella a little defiantly.

It was not her dear papa whom she defied but the thought of Hortensia which spoke

through his lips, the spirit of this mischievous usurper who used that majestic form and face as her mask.

“Good night!” then said Randolph hurriedly; he was sorry to hear Stella rebuked for him—but how sweet the occasion! Good? she thought *him* good? Would she? Could she ever be brought to cling to him as to her safeguard, her protector, her lover? Oh! how he would protect her, how he would care for her!—and Cyril, who had renounced her, wished that he had been her choice! Would it ever come? Heaven in its mercy grant it! Dear stars shining above, send down sweet influences into her heart! All good angels, all blessed spirits breathe the thought into her heart and guide her wish to meet his prayer!

Never since he was born had Randolph felt as he felt to-night, when walking home to his uncle’s house. He did not know himself, nor life, nor thought, nor desire. One with the starry night, yet longing for the sunny day—glad in the peace, in the sleeping stillness, of nature, yet yearning for the flush and flow of her activities—blessed in the actual moment, but looking forward to to-morrow—the present and the future both had a different meaning for him from what either ever had before; and love

wrought in his dull soul the great miracle of transformation—from a clod evolving a poet, out of clay striking the divine fire of inspiration. He seemed to tread on air as he walked along, and to move as if in some rainbow-coloured dream. The sharp night wind of early autumn was like great draughts of wine which stirred his blood and peopled his brain with glorious visions of saints and angels, of fair gardens and stately palaces ;—all because a pale and sad-eyed girl had said he was good and had been rebuked for her advocacy, which yet she had not withdrawn. Oh Love ! oh Love ! king and magician—god and demon—the wind that blows over the harp of the human heart—the sun-rays which colour the clouds :—and we—what are we but poor fools in your great court, shaped, blessed and broken according to your own supreme will !

And now had come Hortensia's domestic opportunity for final and decisive self-assertion. She had been waiting for it ; and it had come at last. So soon as the door had shut on Randolph Mackenzie she very quietly unhooked from her *châtelaine* the master-key which represented her authority in the house and her mistresshood. With a meek air of solemn renunciation she laid it on the little table beside

Mr. Branscombe's glass of "eau sucrée à fleur d'orange."

"Dear Stella," she said—she was generally careful to add the "dear" when she called the girl by her name—"Dear Stella, I wish you to take the housekeeping. I do not care to have it if it makes you unhappy. I have your precious father; and he is all the world to me. But if I am to be mistress I must be sole mistress. We cannot have two ringing the bell and ordering the servants. It must be you or I—one or the other—but not both. Am I not right, Precious Prince?"

"Certainly, Little Love; one must be at the head of affairs. That is only logical," was Mr. Branscombe's answer.

"But is there anything against your authority in my asking, in my own home, the servant whom I can remember ever since I was born, to bring me a glass of water?" said Stella rather warmly.

"He is *my* servant now," answered Hortensia; "and pray, dear Stella, do not lose your temper at such a very small observation. I feel it due to your dear father, far more than to myself, to keep my proper place and prevent encroachments. But where is the need of getting into a passion about it? You lose your temper so soon, dear Stella!"

"I do not think you can say that, Hortensia," said Stella hastily.

"And, dear Stella," Hortensia continued in her quiet monotonous hard voice; "I wish you would not call me plain Hortensia, just as when we were girls together. I do not care for myself, of course; but I do not think it is respectful to your father—whose wife I am. In respecting me you respect him, and the contrary. If you do not like to call me mamma"—"No!" flashed out Stella, "I will never do that!"—"at least call me Mrs. Branscombe," continued Hortensia in the same smooth quiet way as before. How that wicked Stella longed to shake her! "I may be young to be your stepmother; and of course you are a great girl now and grown up, and you may not like to have me here as the mistress and your precious father's wife; but it was his will, and that ought to be sacred to you. Am I not right, Precious Prince?" she added as her peroration, turning her adoring eyes on her husband.

"My Little Love is always right," returned Finery Fred, with a dash of uneasiness in his manner. "And Stella, my dear child," he added, steadyng himself into the semblance of grave displeasure—but why? "you will find your best happiness as your best policy in

respect for my wife and in attention to what she desires."

"I am to understand then, that I am not to ring the bell, here in my own home, nor ask the servant to even bring me a glass of water without your permission?" said Stella, she too speaking quietly so far as manner went, but her heart within on fire.

"Not in my presence," answered Hortensia. "I am the mistress, and I must be treated as the mistress."

"And as for calling you Mrs. Branscombe—yes, I will, with pleasure," Stella went on to say, her colour rising, her eyes darkening, her voice deepening. "I would call you anything, Hortensia, that should best express the unfathomable gulf there is between us and the infinite wrong that you have done me!"

"Precious Prince, protect me!" cried Hortensia, flinging herself into her husband's arms and bursting into tears. "Now you see what I have to endure!" she added, sobbing.

"Stella, apologize to my wife," said Mr. Branscombe sternly.

"Never!" said Stella, rising and facing her father. "It is she who has done me the wrong, not I who have injured her. I will not apologize, papa!"

"Then leave the room," said Mr. Branscombe, whom the tears of his Little Love distressed as much as his former Star's wicked temper and contumacy annoyed. "Leave the room, and do not let me see your face again till you have come to a better frame of mind, and can recognize both your blessings and your superiors."

So down with a crash went another cardboard Temple of Love; and the warrant of poor Stella's disinheritance from her father's affection was finally and definitely signed.

CHAPTER XVI.

AT THE BREAKFAST TABLE.

THE next morning, when Randolph came up to Rose Hill as usual, he saw that something had happened to gravely disturb Stella—Stella, always his radiant Star, how much soever she might have paled for others.

The excitement of the foregoing night was still upon the faithful soul for whom Mr. Branscombe, as Prospero, could find no simile so exact as that of Caliban. He felt as if he bore in visible characters about him the words of his great desire, his fervent thought, and, by dint of desiring and thinking, his fragrant hope. As he walked along the road that led to Rose Hill, he felt as if he were coming to the term of his present career and to the opening of a new life. But when he saw Stella's face, pale and mournful as in the days when love had been at war with duty and Cyril's was the one name to

which she dare not give utterance, then his heart died within him; and yet it did not die. Only himself and all his own great hope and yearning sank into the background, and how he could best make her happy was the guardian sentinel of all the rest.

"What is the matter, dearest Stella?" he said, as he took both her hands in his, in his deep love and faithful sympathy forgetting to be formal and conventional.

"Randolph, I am just broken-hearted," she said. "You must help me; you must tell me what I am to do. I am too wretched as things are—it is impossible to go on like this; but I am bewildered, and do not know where to turn for help."

"I am glad you have come to me. What is it?" he said again, simply but earnestly.

How his heart beat! Why did she leave her hands in his? Did she feel the spirit that ran through his blood, as a song not yet born into sound flows in unspoken melody through the brain?

"I will tell you, and then you can judge," she answered—poor miserable Stella! with her somewhat prosaic sorrows created by feminine jealousy and girlish littleness as her answer to his poetic exaltation, his divine fire!

And on this she told him of what had happened last night after he had left; of the coldness like death existing between her and her father; of how Hortensia had come between them so that things would never be right again; and of how it was impossible for her, Stella, to remain at home in the false and humiliating position to which her young step-mother had doomed her.

"You cannot stay," said Randolph in a low voice. "You must leave, Stella, for your own sake, your own self-respect."

"I know I must," she answered; "but where can I go? What can I do? It would be such an affront to papa if I went out as a companion or a governess! And I could not live with any one here. When I go I must go quite away."

"You must," echoed Randolph — "quite away."

All this time he had been holding her hands in his, she scarcely knowing that he was doing so, but only conscious of a certain sense of friendly sympathy and protection, of a certain tender brotherliness which made the sadness of the moment less intolerable.

"Stella," he then said, his voice low and sweet as a song, his face transformed from its usual clumsy goodness and doglike devotion

into the face of a man of full purpose, resolute, impassioned, and raised by love to the dignity of self-assertion, to the majesty of manhood; "dear Stella, come with me. Give me the right to care for you, to love you, to protect you, to make you happy. I do not ask you to love me—not yet—only to let me love you and work for you; to keep you from all harm and to make you as happy as the devotion and respect of my life can make you. You are the only woman I have ever loved, and if I could make your life happy I should ask nothing more of fate or fortune."

That softened voice, those pleading eyes, that earnest face!—and the true good loyal heart within which these but faintly expressed! Stella looked up at him, her own eyes dark and humid; her own face full of emotion; but alas! not of the kind that matched his.

"Oh, Randolph! Randolph! I am so sorry!" she said, bending towards him in pure sweet pity. "I never dreamt of such a thing—I did not see nor suspect it. You are just to me my own dear, dear brother, and I had no idea that I was more to you. What can I do! what can I say! I am so sorry, so grieved, but I could not marry you, dear. It would be impossible!—it would be sacrilege!"

“Why?” he asked, his ruddy face as pale as the white hand which he still held in his own.

“You are my brother,” she said evasively.

“There is no law against such a brotherhood as mine becoming something nearer and dearer,” pleaded Randolph with more acuteness than he generally displayed.

“But I could not,” she answered.

“Tell me straightly why, Stella—Star of all the earth to me,” said Randolph. “Is it because you do not love me?—only because you do not love me?”

She looked down, her face full of distress.

“Or is it,” he continued, his voice grave and steady, no longer low and musical but like the voice of one to whom truth is dearer even than love; “is it because you still love Cyril?”

Stella turned away her head.

“He no longer loves me,” she said; then she looked up into Randolph’s face; “but I do still love him,” she added, with a kind of spiritual self-abandonment, as flattering in its own way, if less satisfactory, than if she had confessed that she loved him himself. “I cannot help it, Randolph! I know that it is mean-spirited, weak, unwomanly, horrid, but I do love him! I do!” she repeated fervently. “And never to the end of my life could I love any one else!”

"Then all is said," answered poor Randolph sadly, and yet how noble in his sadness, how heroically unselfish, how grand in his self-suppression! "I could not even beseech you to love me, if your heart is still with Cyril. But you must always let me be your brother, Stella, and you must forget all that I have said. It was just the madness of the moment; and you must make use of me as if I were really the own brother you feel me to be. Will you promise this, dear? You do not know how I can keep back what it would be unworthy, as well as unwise, to encourage. You will never see anything more in me than you have hitherto, if only you will love me as your best friend, your true brother."

He still kept her hands and bent forward, looking into her face. All the inspiration, the fervid poetry, the ecstatic dream, the grand awakening from the earth-bound poverty of his daily life had gone. He was once more only the humble guardian, the faithful watch-dog, the devoted friend, the unselfish, loyal and protecting brother, the incorruptible lieutenant guarding the captain's treasure; he was once more Brother Randolph, and the sudden, swift, illumination had passed as if it had never been.

“Promise to give me back your trust and sisterly love,” he said, tears in his eyes.

“Yes,” said Stella fervently. “I believe in you, Randolph, as I believe in the day, and I trust you as I trust my own soul.”

“Thank you ; and God bless you,” said Randolph, lifting her pale thin hands to his lips, and kissing them as a devotee might have kissed the shrine of his god.

But all this had not answered Stella’s latest questions ; What was she to do ? and Where was she to go ?

When Randolph went back to Derwent Lodge he found a telegram waiting for him there—a telegram which had exercised his aunt Cara greatly and made her as terrified as people who live in the country are generally made by these swift and mysterious messengers. He opened it, and found that the sender was Cyril Ponsonby ; the place, London ; the date, that very day. It was concise and peremptory, saying simply: “Come up at once. You will find me at the club ;” leaving him in a fog as to all the rest:—Why Cyril had come back so suddenly from India ; why he wanted to see him, Randolph ; and what was to be the upshot of all this strange confusion. He could but obey the summons of his friend ; and without even

sending a message to Stella, he flung his things into his portmanteau and just caught the up-train, without half a minute to spare.

It was late when he got to London, but mindful of his duty as lieutenant and friend, he drove straight to the rendezvous appointed. He found Cyril, with his hat over his eyes, sitting in the reading-room, pretending to be interested in the dullest newspaper on the table and not seeing a word of what he looked at.

"At last!" said Cyril, drawing a deep breath as Randolph entered. "God bless you, old fellow! I knew that I could count on you."

"To the death," said Randolph below his breath. Aloud he only answered: "Of course. What brings you over, old man?" then asked Pylades, looking wistfully at the grave, changed, melancholy face of the once careless, happy boy.

How the character of it had altered! How all the laughter had turned to stern decision; all the gaiety to grave intensity!—how utterly the boy had died, and with what mournful power the man had risen from his ashes!

"Stella," said Cyril!

Randolph felt his own face grow pale, but he neither winced nor shrank. It was the hour of his ordeal and he had to go through with it to the end.

"Yes? and why?" he answered, his light blue eyes raised straight and calm into his friend's face.

"Both Ethel White and old Quigley have written to me," said Cyril. "And both have told me to come home and see Stella. But I cannot believe in any one as I believe in you, old fellow—you will tell me the truth. What is the truth, Ran? Does Stella still love me, or am I wanted by the friends as a kind of pis-aller against her father? I know that Val Cowley is engaged to the Pennefather girl, so there is no truth in that report; but I am sore, Ran, and suspicious, and do not see my way. I loved that girl. God! yes, I loved her!" he said.

He turned away his head, then crossed his arms on the table and laid his face upon them, trembling.

"And she loves you," said Randolph in a steady voice, laying his hand on Cyril's shoulder. "She has never wavered, Cyril. When all sorts of reports came down she stuck to you in public as well as private, and refused to believe a word to your disfavour. Go down to her, old man. You will find her where you left her."

Not a chord in the clear voice shook; not a

muscle of the honest face changed. His strong heart was braced to sacrifice, and the holocaust was offered up without failing or wavering.

"Is this true, Ran? God's own truth?" cried Cyril lifting up his face.

"True as the sun in the sky," said Randolph. "There is no purer lovelier soul in Christendom than Stella Branscombe; and she loves you."

Cyril held out his hand to his friend, and the two exchanged one of those silent pressures which mean more than words to men.

"Thank you," he said simply. "I know that I have to thank you!"

"No," said Randolph frankly; "you have to thank her alone. I love her as much as you do, Cyril; but she loves you only. And now good-bye; you have no time to lose. The night-train will take you down in time for breakfast, and she is too good to be kept longer in suspense. Good-bye, old fellow; and good luck."

"But you—when shall I see you again?" said Cyril anxiously.

A sad kind of smile came over Randolph's face.

"That is rather uncertain," he said. "I am off to New Zealand by the next mail, and do not see my way back to England again just yet."

But I must not keep you. Hurry up, and God bless you."

Once more the two young men clasped hands; and then Randolph Mackenzie passed out into the distance and the night, never more to cross the platforms of those lives which he had helped to bless at the expense of his own.

Was it a good omen or a bad that Cyril should have chosen that very carriage over the window of which, more than a year ago now, he had scrawled, out of the very exuberance of his happiness and hope: "My Love! My Love!"? "My Love!"—How it thrilled him with a strange sense of presage when he first caught those graven words and remembered all the glad folly of the hour! Was it the word of the past done with and dead? or was it the earnest of the future linking itself on to the past? Randolph had assured his success; and Randolph never lied. It was surely for good—a prophecy of safety, an omen of success. Much as he had learned to doubt, little as he now suffered himself to hope or to trust, this time the old spirit conquered the new lessons. Yes, it was an omen for good; and he fairly laughed aloud as he drew his diamond ring from his finger—*her* ring which he had not returned and which until now had never left his hand—and

scrawled a big Star in the corner of the pane. Then he added the date; and his voice went up like a prayer—“My Love! My Love!”

The Branscombe family were at breakfast when he arrived at Rose Hill, just as on that bright May morning when the accepted lover, the glad son of the house, had come down to his own, full of that confident assurance which has gone past the stage of hope. Now, as then, he had sent on no word of warning, no avant courier, either of demand or prayer. He trusted all to the revelation of the moment, to the truth made manifest by the unprepared confession of surprise. It was a risk in more ways than one, and thoughtless as regarded Stella; but he did not wait to think; and so, without warning or previous notice, he came into the room—Jones opening the door and saying: “Mr. Ponsonby,” as if the lad had been here only yesterday and was fully expected to-day.

Stella started to her feet and turned to him, but without moving. She only said, in a breathless kind of way:

“Cyril, have you come at last?”

But one look in his eyes was enough. The sad face of the bronzed, mournful, bearded man was the face of him who had loved her as a boy and who loved her now as much as then. The

honest eyes, less glad than they were a year ago, were still as frank and truthful, as candid, as sincere, and still the eyes of one who could neither lie nor feign. The hands held out to her were as strong to hold, the arms which clasped her close to that throbbing heart, ran with blood as warm and loyal as in the days gone by. The voice which said "My Love! My Love!"—the lips which kissed hers there in the sight of prim Hortensia, to whom only her own kisses were virtuous—of elegant Mr. Branscombe, to whom he was but an earthworm and a clod—those lips were as loving as before, as faithful as were her own. What need of explanation? Who wanted assurance? All was told and all was known. They loved each other now as they had loved each other then; and the clouds which had risen between them were swept away for ever now when the great sun-god Love shone on them once again. The bonds which had been broken were reunited; and the checked fountain of joy sprang up from the barren sands where it had been lost—laughing in the sun as it rose.

Mr. Branscombe looked at Hortensia for a lead. His Little Love had her hand on the silken rein, and the finest, smallest, most invisible but most inflexible silver hook was in the nostrils of the great autocrat. She looked back

at him, understanding his appeal and taking in the whole situation at a glance.

"How glad I am!" she said smiling as she bent her head to his, speaking in an audible whisper. "Dear Stella! she has deserved her happiness. This is the marriage of all others for her! How wise she has been to see it! Don't you think so, Precious Prince?"

"Yes, Little Love. I have always wished it—always desired it," said Mr. Branscombe with graceful acquiescence, stately and jocund in one.

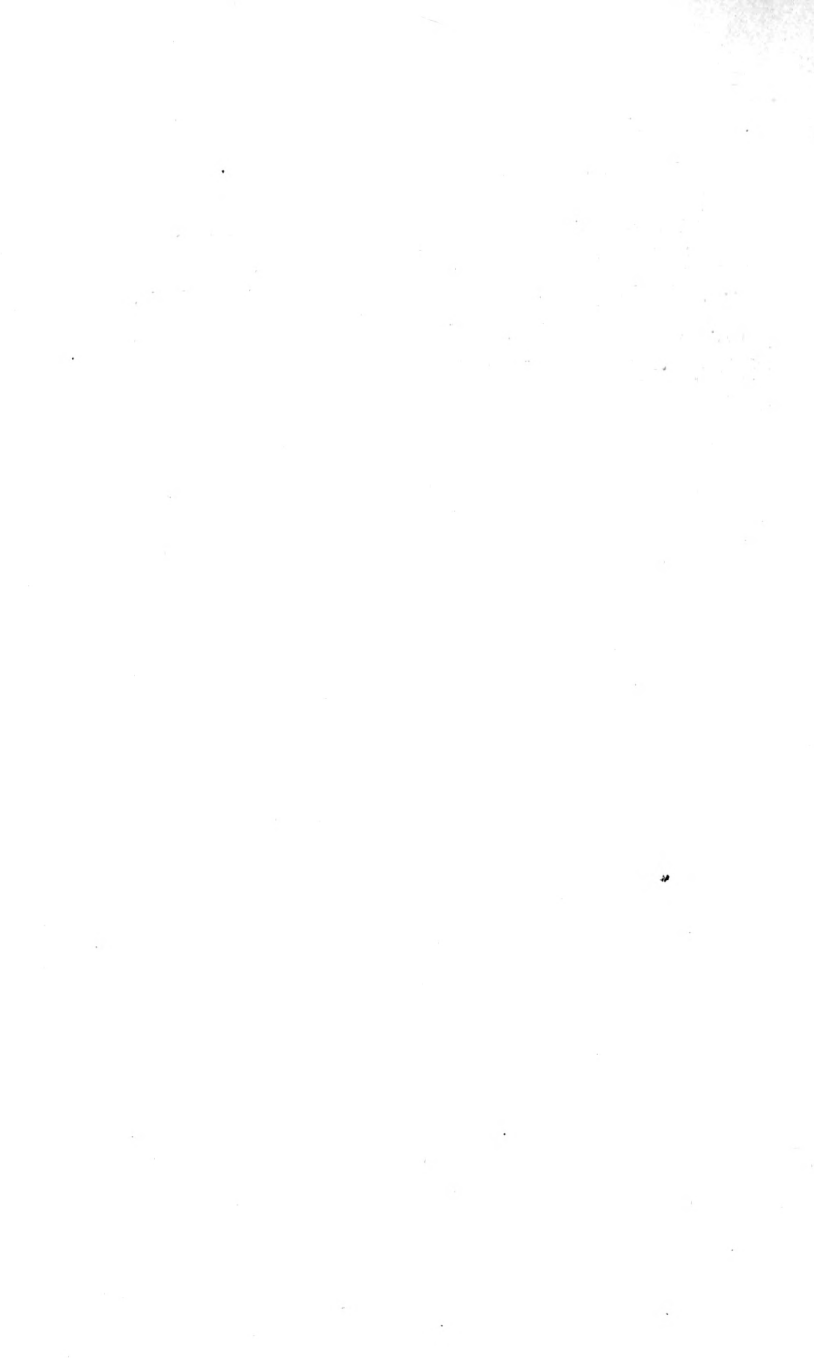
He turned to Cyril, and, just as in olden times, held out two long white scented fingers, with their filbert-shaped nails so delicately pared and daintily polished. He did not even rise from his seat. The Son of the House was beyond these small formalities, and paternal familiarity was the better welcome.

"Ah, Cyril, dear boy, good morning!" he said, exactly as if he had seen him over night, with no excitement, no surprise, no questioning as to how or why he had so suddenly appeared. "Jones, a plate for Mr. Ponsonby. What will you have, my dear boy? I can recommend those kidneys à la Soubise; and young appetites are generally sharp-set. By the way, first let me present you to Mrs. Branscombe. I think you knew her in olden days?"

“Yes,” said Cyril, shaking hands with Hortensia ; but for the life of him he could not be cordial either to her or to her husband.

“This is the only change you will find in your old home,” continued Mr. Branscombe airily. “All else just the same ! Stella as good a girl as ever and as devoted to you ; I, as much your friend and as glad to see you as before ; my wife your firm and constant champion :—only a year has passed since last we met—a year which has left us all, I trust, with an added increment of wisdom, happiness and health. Now, my dear boy, attack those kidneys while they are hot else they will lose half their flavour : and Stella, my good child, pass your future husband the toast !”

THE END.



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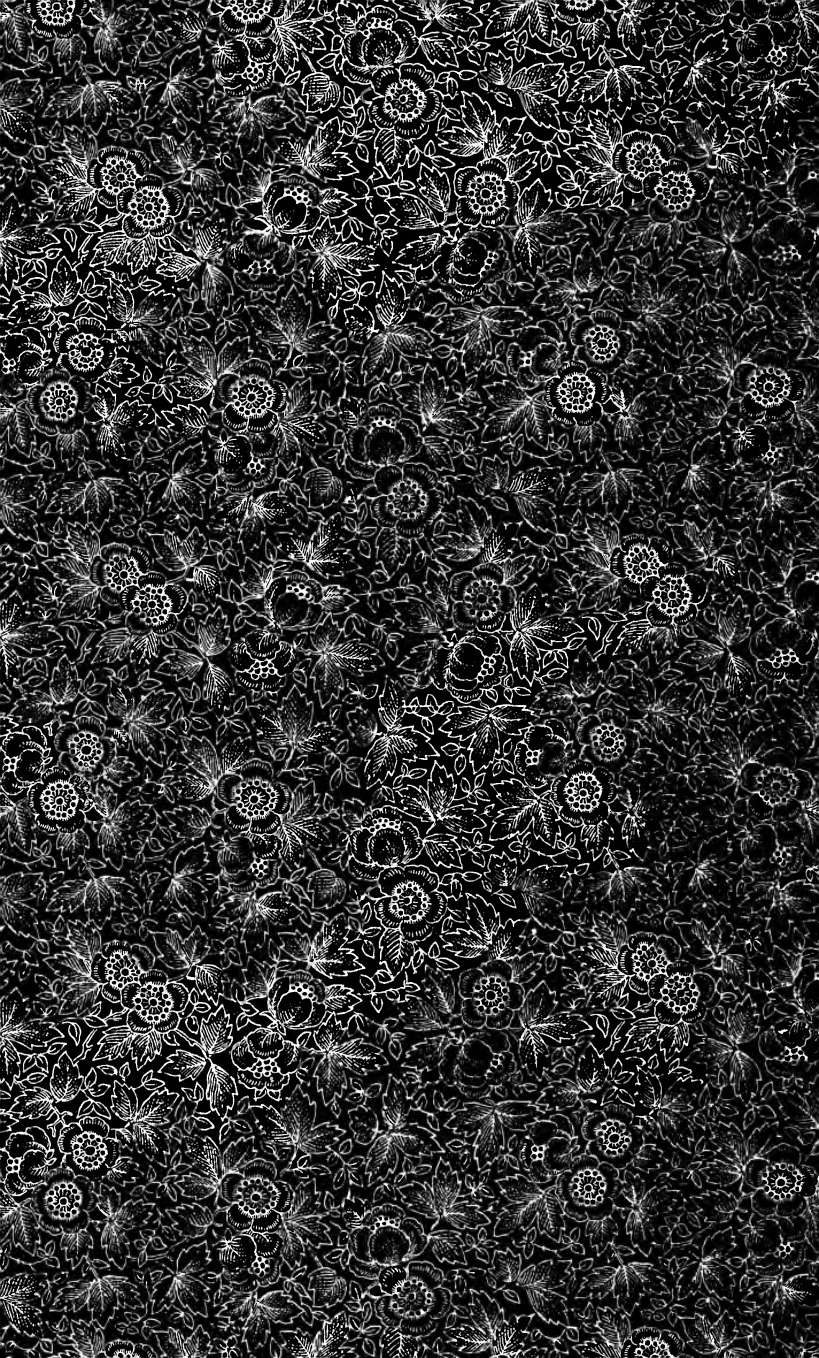
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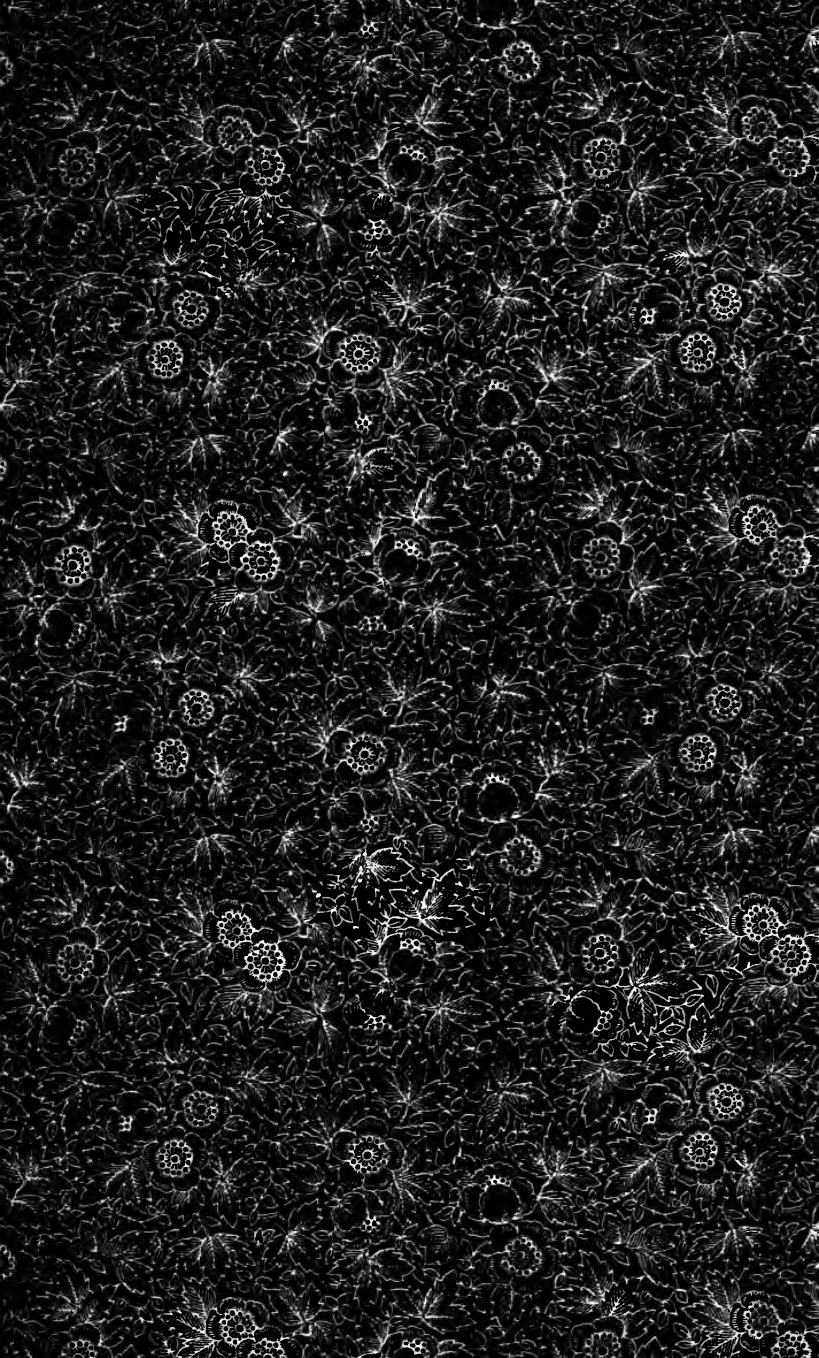
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